ISSN Print: 2664-8792
ISSN Online: 2664-8806
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.54
IJRM 2025; 7(2): 313-323
www.managementpaper.net
Received: 7-06-2025
Accepted: 9-07-2025

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The cost of control: A case study on micromanagement and organizational dysfunction

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.33545/26648792.2025.v7.i2d.467

Abstract
This study investigates the lived experiences of two employees who were subjected to sustained micromanagement within a small to medium-sized service organization, examined over a period of fourteen months. Guided by an interpretivist framework, data were collected through interviews, internal documents, email correspondence, and field observations to construct a textured account of how managerial control unfolded and evolved. The findings reveal a progressive restriction of decision-making autonomy, the erosion of trust, and the transformation of communication into a primary tool of control. Participants reported diminished confidence, demotivation, and disengagement. Observations revealed that micromanagement had become normalized within departmental culture, reinforced by routine practices, favoritism, and the absence of higher-level managerial accountability. The study also highlights the role of toxic leadership in perpetuating these dynamics, demonstrating how individual managerial behavior, when left unchecked, can escalate into entrenched organizational dysfunction. These insights align with theoretical perspectives on self-determination, organizational justice, and toxic leadership, while extending current literature by showing how micromanagement reshapes not only work processes but also employee identity, morale, and interpersonal relationships. Taken together, the study argues that micromanagement must be understood not merely as an individual leadership flaw but as an organizational pathology with wide-reaching consequences for both human well-being and institutional effectiveness.

Keywords: Micromanagement, human resources, toxic working environment, employee burnout, productivity loss, leadership failure, control and organizational theories, psychological theories.

Introduction
In the pursuit of operational excellence, many organizations fall into the trap of excessive control, often embodied in the practice of micromanagement. Micromanagement is often characterized by excessive oversight, control, and lack of trust in subordinates; such behavior is widely recognized yet underexplored in connection with organizational dysfunction. Superiors who micromanage their subordinates generally do so because they feel unsure, self-doubting, insecure, fearful, and threatened for their position (White, 2010) [57]. Moreover, extreme micromanagers behave pathologically, refusing to accept personal responsibility or accountability and creating scapegoats to blame subordinates for their own mistakes. They seldom develop their people, but instead exploit them, preferring to control results rather than inspiring creativity. Fearing competition, they rarely hire talented, experienced, or skillful people and know exactly how to challenge them (White, 2010) [57].

In some cases, micromanagement may increase productivity over a short-term period, but in the long-term, problems will eventually defeat any short-term gains. Studies have shown that exerting fear on employees does have an impact; it may increase productivity temporarily but eventually shows serious consequences in the long run. Though micromanagement causes too many problems at work, why doesn't management pay attention to preventing such situations? Is such behavior easily detectable?

While the intention behind micromanagement may be to enhance efficiency or ensure quality, numerous studies have demonstrated that this management style typically results in negative consequences for both employees and the broader organization (Block, 2016; Yukl, 2013) [6, 61]. At its core, micromanagement undermines employee autonomy and intrinsic motivation, two critical drivers of productivity and innovation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [12]. Employees subjected to excessive oversight often report reduced job satisfaction, increased

stress, and a diminished sense of professional efficacy (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013) [13]. Furthermore, the subordinates become so afraid of constant criticism from their micromanaging superiors that they lose their creativity, avoid taking any risks, lose self-confidence, and all these outcomes and frustrations end up on the customers (White, 2010) [58]. On an organizational level, such behavior can lead to bottlenecks in decision-making, poor communication, and ultimately, dysfunction across departments (Manzoni & Barsoux, 2002) [39]. What is the crossing point on the line from good managerial styles to micromanagement style? Do micromanagers understand the harm they cause to others and their impact?

Despite growing recognition of its adverse impacts, micromanagement remains prevalent in many hierarchical organizations, often disguised as a pursuit of excellence or accountability. This persistence is partly due to the lack of empirical evidence quantifying the organizational costs associated with this management style. This research study aims to explore the tangible and intangible costs associated with micromanagement within a mid-sized European corporate setting. Understand the dynamics of micromanagement and investigate the behavioral, cognitive, psychological, and relational dynamics that contribute to and "promote" micromanagement behaviors. By examining the behaviors of key managers and their impact on organizational performance and employee morale, this study aims to contribute to a growing body of literature that will advocate for new, empowering leadership approaches as well as healthier and more resilient organizational cultures. An overview of the existing literature review from different angles follows, and subsequently, the methodology section, as well as the findings and discussion chapters, will follow. Last but not least, limitations, recommendations, and conclusion chapters will seal the current research.

Literature Review Search

Micromanagement

Micromanagement is broadly characterized as excessive oversight and control of employees' work by managers, often involving unnecessary scrutiny of minor details and limiting employee autonomy (Harvey & Brown, 2022) [20]. This management style has increasingly come under critical scrutiny due to its negative implications for both individual and organizational performance. Research shows that micromanagement negatively impacts employee motivation and job satisfaction. When employees perceive their managers as overly controlling, they tend to experience decreased intrinsic motivation, which can eventually lead to burnout and disengagement (Nguyen *et al*., 2023) [44]. This occurs because micromanagement undermines employees' sense of competence and autonomy, two essential components of self-determination theory that drive motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2017) [13]. Consequently, micromanagement often results in higher turnover rates and reduced organizational commitment (Kang & Park, 2021) [29].

Workplaces where employees are never empowered, not allowed to make decisions, nor permitted to work autonomously, then it is recognized that micromanagement exists (White 2010) [58]. Organizational dysfunction is another consequence of micromanagement. Excessive control disrupts communication flows, hampers decision-making, and fosters a culture of mistrust (Smith & Jones, 2020) [51]. This environment stifles innovation and adaptability by discouraging employees from taking initiative or sharing new ideas (Cheng & Wang, 2022) [9]. Furthermore, micromanagement contributes to increased operational inefficiencies. When managers are overly involved in day-to-day tasks, they often create blockages and slow down processes, detracting from overall productivity (Lee & Kim, 2024) [33]. They maintain constant monitoring of the projects and request inclusion in email communications even if these emails are not of significant importance (Majhosheva, 2024) [34]. Outcomes of this style of management are the "draining" of employee satisfaction, exhaustion, morale reduction, diminished motivation, and generally the loss of self (Majhosheva, 2024) [34].

Interestingly, some studies highlight contextual factors that influence the impact of micromanagement. For instance, in highly regulated or safety-critical industries, closer supervision may be necessary to ensure compliance and error reduction (Williams & Harris, 2021) [56]. However, even in these contexts, excessive micromanagement beyond reasonable oversight tends to have detrimental effects (Johnson *et al*., 2023) [24]. Recent advances in leadership research suggest that transformational and servant leadership styles are effective counterpoints to micromanagement. These approaches emphasize trust, empowerment, and employee development, which help cultivate a positive organizational climate and improve performance outcomes (Martinez & Gomez, 2022) [38]. Therefore, addressing micromanagement involves not only limiting excessive control but also fostering leadership practices that encourage autonomy and collaboration. In sum, the literature clearly positions micromanagement as a costly managerial practice that impairs both employee well-being and organizational functioning. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate the dysfunctions associated with micromanagement and promote healthier, more productive workplaces.

Although micromanagement presents many negative results, another scope suggests that micromanagement can be advantageous for the company if this is performed appropriately (Ndidi, Amah, & Okocha, 2022) [42]. A manager's job is to "control" and direct their employees' moves and tasks to boost productivity, though these must be done in a non-critical manner in order not to cause insecurity, disengagement, low morale, or increase turnover in employees (Ndidi *et al*., 2022) [42]. Researchers emphasized that the majority of managers who micromanage their employees have good intentions, and this management style is not harmful for people, but there are times and cases where it is required (Ndidi *et al*., 2022) [42]. Irrespective of the positive or negative use of micromanagement all four areas of the business are affected; the organization (e.g. retention, conflicts tardiness, absenteeism, quality, processes etc.), the employees (e.g. morale, job satisfaction, productivity, career stagnation, reduced responsiveness, perception on lack of value, risk taking etc.), the manager (e.g. low productivity, low support, rigid policies/procedures, reduce responsiveness etc.) and the customers (will "suffer" from reduced service, not heard, not being prioritized see lack of creativity, excessive costs etc.) (Ndidi *et al*., 2022) [42].

Employers' perspective is that the micromanagement style is used by managers because they worry too much about the daily operations of their departments. Consequently, they

interfere with their subordinates' work to avoid any negative outcomes, but at the same time, they are unable to plan for the department's expansion, thus losing the idea of their role in the business (Mishra, N., Rajkumar, M., & Mishra, R. 2019) [41]. N. Mishra, M. Rajkumar, and R. Mishra (2019) [41] added that micromanagement is also linked to narcissism, "prompting" managers to take advantage of their power position and become control freaks, suspicious of employees' actions, and abusing them to meet their ends. Such behavior and actions drove scientists to conclude that these people are psychopaths and become hindrances for their organization; decrease productivity levels, hinder organizational effectiveness and development, as well as create dissatisfied customers. Employees can be highly productive and work efficiently and effectively when they are trusted, nurtured, feel secure, confident, powerful, and able to think, decide, and act on their own to perform their tasks (Mishra, N., Rajkumar, M., & Mishra, R., 2019) [41].

Despite growing recognition of its adverse impacts, micromanagement remains prevalent in many hierarchical organizations. From a psychodynamic perspective, micromanagement can be understood as a defense mechanism rooted in unconscious fears of inadequacy or loss of control. Leaders who micromanage may unconsciously project their own anxiety or unresolved internal conflicts onto the workplace, manifesting in controlling behaviors (Gabriel, 1999) [16]. Such behaviors create a toxic environment where employees feel disempowered, distrusted, and demoralized. Furthermore, the dysfunction caused by micromanagement manifests in various forms, including increased workplace anxiety and high turnover rates (Nguyen & Hansen, 2016) [43]. Over time, such negative effects create a permanent toxic work culture where innovation is suppressed and communication flows are hindered (Kearney, Shemla, & Van Knippenberg, 2019) [30]. Research suggests that micromanaged employees often feel disengaged and undervalued, which can lead to absenteeism, burnout, and a breakdown in organizational cohesion (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013) [13].

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory defines how individuals interpret the behavior of others by assigning causality to either internal dispositions or external circumstances. Rooted in the human need to make sense of the social world, attribution serves as a psychological lens through which people evaluate responsibility, blame, and intent. While this process can foster understanding and predictability in interpersonal relations, it is equally prone to errors, particularly in organizational settings where power dynamics, stress, and hierarchical complexity distort perception. Attributional errors are not merely cognitive tendencies; often, they have real, damaging consequences in organizational settings. When managers consistently misattribute employee behavior to internal flaws rather than contextual factors, they lay the psychological groundwork for micromanagement, a pattern of excessive control, surveillance, and interference in employees' work processes (White, 2010) [59]. This managerial overreach is typically rationalized through a distorted attributional lens: employees are seen as lazy, inattentive, or incapable unless closely monitored. Such judgments reflect the fundamental attribution error, wherein situational constraints such as poor systems design, lack of training, or unclear expectations are minimized or ignored (Ross, 1977; Martinko *et al*., 2007) [46, 37].

Micromanagement behavior exacerbates asymmetries in perception between managers and subordinates. A manager may view their controlling behavior as a necessary response to deadlines or high stakes, yet interpret employees' cautiousness or initiative as evidence of incompetence or insubordination (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) [25]. This double standard fosters a culture of blame and surveillance rather than one of understanding and support. Moreover, persistent misattributions can lead to attributional escalation, a process in which managers faced with repeated performance issues intensify their dispositional attributions and begin to see subordinates as irredeemably flawed (Martinko *et al*., 2007) [37]. As a result, trust erodes, autonomy is withdrawn, and decision-making becomes increasingly centralized. This spiral directly contributes to organizational dysfunction, characterized by low morale, high turnover, diminished creativity, and systemic inefficiency (Harari *et al*., 2018) [19].

From a humanistic perspective, this dysfunction reflects a deeper breakdown in empathy and relational understanding. When leaders fail to appreciate the complex interplay among individuals, relationships, and systemic factors that shape behavior, they replace collaboration with control. Attribution errors then become not only cognitive distortions but also moral shortcomings; a failure in the organizational capacity to see others clearly and to treat them justly (Weiner, 2006) [55].

Furthermore, Malle and Knobe's (1997) [36] work underscored that attribution is often embedded in narratives about intentionality and blame. In organizational settings, these narratives can become institutionalized: employees are evaluated not just on outcomes but on inferred motives, work ethic, and commitment. When these narratives are biased or erroneous, they can justify draconian oversight, punishment, and even exclusion. Over time, organizations shaped by flawed attributions may become rigid, punitive, and self-defeating, prioritizing control over learning, conformity over innovation. Thus, addressing micromanagement and its attendant dysfunction requires more than operational reforms; it necessitates attributional awareness, a deliberate effort by leaders to question their assumptions about causality, revisit their interpretations of behavior, and develop more accurate, empathetic lenses. Only by correcting these foundational errors can organizations foster trust, autonomy, and resilience.

Psychodynamic Theory

Psychodynamic theory shows the influence of unconscious motives, early developmental experiences, and intrapsychic conflict on human behavior (Gabriel, 1999) [16]. In the organizational context, psychodynamic theory provides a powerful lens through which to understand the emotional undercurrents that drive leadership styles, including micromanagement, and the broader patterns of dysfunction that often follow. At the heart of psychodynamic theory is the belief that past experiences, particularly those shaped in childhood, continue to influence adult behavior, often outside of conscious awareness (Gabriel, 1999) [16]. Leaders who micromanage may unconsciously reenact unresolved anxieties about control, authority, or trust that originate in early relational experiences. As Kets de Vries argues, many organizational behaviors stem less from rational choice than from the "inner theater" of leaders, the private scripts

shaped by formative attachment patterns, fear of failure, or unmet needs for approval. Micromanagement can thus be interpreted not merely as a managerial tactic but as a defensive behavior, aimed at reducing internal anxiety by asserting control over the environment. According to Obholzer and Roberts (1994) [45], leaders who feel overwhelmed or threatened may regress to rigid or authoritarian styles of leadership as a coping way to manage their psychological discomfort. This response can create a cycle of projective identification, in which leaders unconsciously displace their insecurities onto subordinates, perceiving them as incompetent or untrustworthy and thus justifying greater control (Stapley, 1996) [53].

These dynamics often result in organizational dysfunction, as employees internalize the projections cast upon them. When workers are consistently treated as incapable, they may either conform to these expectations (a form of learned helplessness) or resist through disengagement and passive defiance. This tension corrodes psychological safety and mutual trust, two essential components of functional work environments (Kahn, 1990) [27]. Over time, organizations governed by unresolved psychodynamic forces may develop cultures marked by fear, compliance, and rigidity, hallmarks of dysfunction. Furthermore, micromanagement can activate dependency and infantilization in teams, impairing creativity and autonomy. Bion (1961), in his study of group dynamics, identified the phenomenon of dependency as a defense mechanism in which group members unconsciously submit to authority in exchange for security. In micromanaged environments, this dynamic can stifle initiative and create toxic cycles of over-dependence and resentment, where neither managers nor subordinates trust themselves or each other.

Critically, the psychodynamic approach also emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and reflection in leadership. Leaders who recognize their own unconscious drives and fears are better positioned to engage in authentic, flexible, and empowering practices. Interventions such as executive coaching, reflective supervision, and psychodynamic consultation can help leaders examine the psychological roots of their need for control, opening the door to more relational and trust-based forms of management. In sum, psychodynamic theory highlights that micromanagement is not solely a functional problem of leadership technique but a deeper psychological issue involving unconscious defenses, projection, and relational trauma. Addressing organizational dysfunction, therefore, requires not only structural reforms but also emotional insight and the courage to face the unconscious fears that shape leadership and organizational life.

Toxic Leadership

Throughout the years, toxic leadership has proven to have a negative impact on the whole organization. Toxic leading drives employees to job dissatisfaction, lower productivity, disengagement, decreased effectiveness, excessive stress, emotional exhaustion, wellbeing imbalance, and increased percentage of turnover rates (Gupta & Chawla, 2024) [18]. Thus, such "contaminated" leadership styles are also linked to corporate psychopaths, encouraging further workplace toxic behaviors such as bullying, conflicts, and discrimination, as well as eroding employee well-being (Gupta & Chawla, 2024) [18]. Another important issue businesses are facing today, more than ever, is the reputation they gain in society through exposure. Toxicity in the organizational environment can easily be revealed by affected employees sharing stressful/negative experiences with their friends and family or even through media exposure. This will cause reputational damage to the business's name and loss of trust from stakeholders (society, customers, shareholders etc.) (Gupta & Chawla, 2024) [18].

Asmaa, Mohamed Hussein, Ahmed Hashem El-Monshed, and Alia, (2024) [2] corroborate that toxic leadership behavior is positively linked to increased workplace deviance; abusive supervision, lack of support, creation of hostile organizational environment, fostering negative/bad attitudes and behaviors as well as encouraging feelings of frustration, anger, conflict and spreading powerlessness among employees (Asmaa *et al*., 2024) [2]. Subsequently, toxic leadership has a combined impact on multiple factors in employee behavior with "catastrophic" outcomes. Addressing these factors collectively may be more effective in managing and reducing workplace deviance (Asmaa *et al*., 2024) [2]. Another research revealed that employees aim to acquire and protect valuable resources, including psychological, social, and organizational aspects. Toxic leadership behaviors deplete these resources, resulting in heightened stress, emotional exhaustion, and diminished trust (Dahlan, Omar, & Kamarudin, 2024) [11]. This depletion adversely affects employee satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty, ultimately leading to reduced performance. Similarly, the social exchange theory highlights the importance of reciprocal relationships in organizations, where employees perceive that positive work engagement will be rewarded by the organization (Dahlan *et al*., 2024) [11]. Toxic leadership disrupts this exchange, eroding trust and commitment between employees and their leaders, and negatively influencing organizational outcomes. These theoretical perspectives provide a robust framework for understanding the mechanisms through which toxic leadership behaviors undermine employee well-being and organizational performance, as evidenced in prior studies (Dahlan *et al*., 2024) [11].

Organizational Justice Dimensions

Organizational justice is a multifaceted construct that significantly impacts employee behavior and organizational outcomes. As Schierholt, Kauê Felipe Ramos, Ricardo Guimarães, and Régio Marcio (2023) [49] note, fairness is not simply a managerial tool; it is a lived experience that shapes how individuals feel, think, and act in their professional environment. When employees perceive fairness, a sense of belonging and purpose naturally flourishes, nurturing a climate where engagement, commitment, and collaboration thrive. This broad concept is often understood through three interwoven dimensions: Distributive justice speaks to the equity of outcomes, whether rewards, recognition, and resources are allocated in a way that feels deserved. Procedural justice addresses the integrity and transparency of the decision-making process, ensuring that policies are applied consistently and voices are genuinely heard. Interactional justice focuses on the human side of organizational life, the respect, empathy, and sincerity conveyed in day-to-day communication. Together, these dimensions form the invisible architecture of organizational relationships, influencing not only performance but also the very sense of worth employees derive from their work.

Perceived organizational exploitation significantly leads to workplace deviance by undermining employees' perceptions of fairness. Specifically, the research identifies two key mediators: distributive justice, which relates to the fairness of outcome allocation, and procedural justice, which pertains to the fairness of the processes used to make decisions (Huang, Wang, Liu, & Lyu, 2023) [22]. This study also highlights that employees with high justice sensitivity are more adversely affected by perceived organizational exploitation, experiencing heightened feelings of injustice that further exacerbate their deviant behaviors (Huang et. al., 2023) [22]. Fostering a fair work environment through transparent procedures and equitable treatment can help reduce the negative impacts of perceived organizational exploitation. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the dynamics of employee perceptions and behaviors in response to organizational practices, advocating for proactive measures to enhance the justice perceptions among employees (Huang et. al., 2023) [22].

Adamovic (2023) [1] noted that organizational justice can be defined as the adherence to traditionally identified justice norms. The most prominent organizational justice theories identified by the scientists include group engagement, uncertainty management, self-interest, fairness heuristic, and deontic models of justice. For employees, justice at work is of high importance for many reasons, and it does play a critical role in their psychological well-being and consequently impacts the organizational outcomes. Factors such as belonging, status, maintaining a positive identity, trustworthiness, morality, interpersonal relationships, feelings of uncertainty, obligations, and positive/favorable results affect people (Adamovic, 2023) [1]. Consequently, justice and its interconnected factors positively affect employees by increasing job satisfaction, organizational commitment, achieving organizational citizenship behavior, and high task performance (Adamovic, 2023) [1]. Moreover, organizational justice is a precondition for the creation of high-quality relationships between subordinates and their managers. Nonetheless, there are dysfunctional outcomes where injustice is found in the organization, leading to negative effects such as counterproductive work behavior, a toxic environment, mistrust, conflicts, intention to quit, revenge, and retaliation. Organizational justice impacts not only individuals and their work but also the teams. Working teams also share a high justice climate perception, believing that the team as an entity in the business is treated with justice and fairness by the organization's authorities otherwise, the team will be dysfunctional with poor outcomes (Adamovic, 2023) [1].

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a deeply human-centered framework for understanding motivation, well-being, and social behavior. At its core lie three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all of which must be nurtured in balance to sustain personal growth and flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2024) [47]. Autonomy involves acting with a sense of volition and personal endorsement, in contrast to being driven by external pressures or rewards. Competence emphasizes the need of individuals to feel effective and capable, while relatedness refers to the desire to feel connected and valued by others (Ryan & Deci, 2024) [47]. When these needs are supported by the social environments, employees tend to thrive, demonstrating greater creativity, sustained engagement, and robust psychological health. Individuals often respond with defensiveness, rigidity, and diminished well-being when they are dissatisfied. Within SDT, several sub-theories illuminate these dynamics: Cognitive Evaluation Theory examines how social contexts can either nourish or undermine intrinsic motivation; Organismic Integration Theory explores the authentic internalization of extrinsic motivations; Causality Orientations Theory identifies individual differences in motivational tendencies; and Basic Psychological Needs Theory focuses squarely on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as drivers of well-being. Collectively, these perspectives frame motivation not as a fixed personal trait but as an emergent quality continuously shaped by our relationships, narratives, and environments (Ryan & Deci, 2024) [47]. SDT, in essence, portrays human beings as naturally inclined toward growth, connection, and authenticity (Ryan & Deci, 2024) [47].

Kaabomeir, Mazhari, Arshadi, and Karami (2022) [26] emphasized that SDT positions autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the foundations for sustaining workplace motivation and well-being. The scientists argued that when these personal needs are fulfilled, employees move toward more self-determined forms of motivation. This shift fosters engagement, creativity, and resilience (Kaabomeir *et al*., 2022) [26]. However, when employees are neglected, motivation becomes externally regulated or even collapses into amotivation. This erosion weakens both morale and performance (Kaabomeir *et al*., 2022) [26]. In this same experimental study, supervisors were trained in need-supportive leadership behaviors. These included offering employees' meaningful choices, explaining the rationale behind decisions, recognizing emotions, providing feedback that strengthens competence, and cultivating genuine interpersonal connections (Kaabomeir *et al*., 2022) [26]. The results were striking. Employees whose supervisors embraced these practices reported greater psychological need satisfaction and higher autonomous motivation. They also reported lower levels of controlled motivation and amotivation. Consequently, supervisors transitioned from task managers to facilitators of human thriving. This finding reinforces the idea that leadership style actively shapes the motivational climate of the workplace (Kaabomeir *et al*., 2022) [26]. From a systems perspective, micromanagement disrupts trust-building feedback loops. It hinders competence development and weakens relational bonds exactly the three needs that SDT identifies as essential for growth.

Methodology

For this research study, a qualitative case study design method was chosen to investigate in-depth the complexities and nature of the case in question (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021) [10]. The research was focused on the prolonged experiences of micromanagement of two members within a four-member department over a fourteen-month period in a single location. The setting was a small to medium-sized organization offering services. Given the complexity of managerial behaviors and the subtle interplay of organizational culture, the case study approach was selected for its ability to capture context-specific, holistic insights (Yin, 2018) [60]. A single, embedded case design enabled both an intensive examination of the department as a whole and a cross-case comparison of the two individual

staff experiences (Stake, 2022) [52]. The research was anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, which values the construction of meaning through lived experience and contextual interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) [14]. This paradigm aligns with the study's aim of exploring how sustained micromanagement practices affect autonomy, trust, performance, and workplace well-being over time.

Data collection occurred over fourteen months, ensuring that the investigation captured longitudinal developments and evolving perceptions among the two department members (S and L for this study). Multiple sources of data collection were used to generate an intensive and detailed examination of the case, including unstructured, semi-structured interviews (face-to-face, telephone conversations, and exchange of messages), internal reports, email correspondence, and a few field observations during departmental meetings. The extended data collection timeline allowed for the identification of patterns, turning points, and shifts in interpersonal dynamics. Ethical considerations were integral throughout the process. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and strict measures were taken to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Interview transcripts were shared with participants for verification before being finalized, ensuring accuracy and respect for their perspectives. Reflexivity was integrated through the use of a research journal to document the researcher's evolving interpretations and positionality throughout the study. This reflexive stance acknowledged the researcher's dual role as analyst and interpreter, particularly given the long duration of data immersion. In sum, the study's methodological rigor, extended timeframe, and layered data collection approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how micromanagement, when sustained over time, can become embedded in organizational culture, shaping communication patterns, relationships, and decision-making structures in enduring ways.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the current study, drawn from a fourteen-month exploration of two employees' sustained experiences of micromanagement within a small-to-medium-sized service organization. Guided by an interpretivist lens, the analysis weaves together insights from interviews, internal documents, email correspondence, and field observations, offering a textured account of how micromanagement unfolded and evolved. The prolonged data collection period allowed patterns, turning points, and subtle shifts in interpersonal dynamics to emerge, revealing how managerial control became embedded in everyday practices. Participants' voices are presented alongside in interpretive commentary, reflecting the study's commitment to present lived experiences while critically examining their implications for autonomy, trust, and workplace well-being. Over the fourteen months, both participants (S & L) described a steady narrowing of their decision-making space, which began approximately three years ago. What began as occasional managerial oversight (when M was promoted three years ago to the mid-manager position) gradually shifted into routine directives (fully the last two years) that left S and L with no room for independent judgment. Interview transcripts, email records, and meeting observations consistently showed a pattern of the manager pre-empting or revising both employees' actions, always without discussion and without taking their permission. This creeping reduction in autonomy was not abrupt but emerged subtly, like a tightening thread, until participants felt their professional agency had all but disappeared.

S and L were not allowed to deliver the complete work assigned to them prior the check and amendments of M. It is noticeable to say here that any mistakes found, or wrong/unclear comments made on participants' final delivered work M always blamed them; noting that the work/ projects were always amended by her prior their delivery to the final destination. M never took responsibility for her wrong actions, and she reported to her immediate manager (G) that S and L completed their job incorrectly or errors were found in their documentation. S and L were not allowed to think, nor to have or express their opinion, and should always wait to be assigned a job by M, even if all job requests were acknowledged to all three at the same time. There were many times where both S and L had no job to do (even some of the requests appeared as urgent), and in the past, this situation used to increase their stress levels and anxiety, but nowadays they both revealed they didn't bother or care if no work was assigned to them.

Both participants expressed that they were not allowed to work autonomously nor allowed to ask any face-to-face questions (even if all three were sitting in the same place). S and L confessed, ironically, that they were allowed to breathe and exchange a few words between them throughout the day. M wanted the participants to be quiet throughout the workday and even criticized them while eating, to not make noise while chewing their food. This situation drove trust in management/leadership to weaken as micromanagement persisted, yet the relationship between S and L became stronger. During the repeated interviews, it was noticeable that both participants were never calm, always spoke with anger and frustration, acknowledging that their expertise was neither valued nor believed. As weeks turned into months, morale and self-confidence visibly eroded, and it was clear that they were not respected for what they were nor for their work. Both participants expressed that they were demotivated, unhappy, and dissatisfied at their workplace. In addition, all three individuals, S, L and M had the same qualifications, while S had even more years of experience on the job than M. However, M was favored by the business management through family connections.

Communication between participants and their manager (M) was only exchanged in written format; only through emails, even if all three of them were working in the same space every day for nine hours, sitting next to each other. Analysis of emails, meeting transcripts, message exchanges and the projects/work delivered by S and L were always followed by Ms comments. All these incidents revealed that communication itself had become a primary tool for control. Instructions were detailed to the point of micromanaging not just outcomes but the process of work itself. Overall, it is noticeable to add that internal communication, work deliverables, and projects were all verified and monitored by M; G was never informed about the actual situation and was upsent of employees' lives (S and L). M was the only person to report to G and discuss any issues found on the different projects.

One of the two participants (L) took the initiative to speak to G about the toxic environment and behavior of M towards

both S and L. However, G blamed L for the situation, adding to her surprise that she had made too many mistakes on her work: she was unable to deliver a holistic work promptly on her own, and her behavior was unacceptable. With bitterness, L explained that due to family commitments, it would be difficult for her to search for work elsewhere; therefore, she just accepted the situation and continued with her work. S expressed she was furious with G's response to L and explained that G responded ironically to her too many times, even when G found her in the kitchen discussing with other colleagues. S corroborated that in the last twelve months, whenever G behaved ironically to her, she responded in the same tone (a year ago, S never replied to her boss's (G) ironic comments, but now she felt able and strong enough to confront him). Could it be possible that M was giving faulty information about the two employees to G, or was G also taking advantage of the power of his position to behave badly? One thing was for sure: G never got involved in the department's issues. The management of employees, to know employees' tasks and to build a healthy environment, isn't management's responsibility?

By the end of the study period, micromanagement had moved beyond an individual managerial style to become an ingrained feature of departmental culture. The persistence of control-oriented practices, reinforced by routine administrative processes and normalized in day-to-day interactions, meant that employees came to expect and reluctantly accept constant oversight in their daily routine. Field observations in the final months captured this normalization: meetings ran on tightly scripted agendas, opportunities for discussion were minimal to non-acceptable, and the decision-making authority in that specific department was firmly centralized and fully controlled by M; G who held a higher position from M was upsent from decision making, upsent from communicating with colleagues but always present for the leader of the company.

Findings also displayed that M's behavior was different, mainly with the people she favored; very well-mannered and replied promptly, showing no signs of her toxic behavior towards her subordinates. Nevertheless, M's behavior and interactions with the rest of the non-favorable colleagues, in other departments, were different; not answering the phone, not replying to their emails, or when responding, she responded with narcissism, arrogance, and a manner of not valuing anyone. Last but not least, on investigation, the researcher also detected that the work delivered and the period of delivery differed accordingly towards favorable or non-favorable colleagues; if the colleagues belonged to the favorable team, they received their projects on time, whereas those who were not favorable received their projects always with a delay. Studying M's behavior and interactions with other people, as well as the feedback received from other departments about the above findings, corroborate the reliability and validity of the findings. To conclude this chapter of findings, investigations revealed two very frustrated members of staff, working in a toxic environment where they were underestimated, undervalued, not trusted, and had no say in the company. At the same time, S and L confessed that even if their quality of their work was good (for this they were never rewarded nor received a well done for your work), at present they felt and started being disengaged, demotivated, extremely dissatisfied and did not care when they would deliver their work, which at the end seemed not their work; in their last interview it was detectable that they were already disconnected with their job.

Taking together, these findings reveal micromanagement not as a static managerial tendency, but as a dynamic, evolving process that gradually reshapes the social and cultural fabric of a workplace. Through the lens of the interpretivist paradigm, the experiences of the two participants illuminate how meaning is constructed and reconstructed over time, as autonomy is curtailed, trust erodes, and communication becomes a means of control. The nature of this study makes visible the subtle ways in which these patterns deepen and become embedded in organizational culture, shaping not only what employees do but how they perceive themselves within the workplace. These insights provide a critical foundation for the discussion that follows, situating the findings within existing literature and considering their implications for leadership practice, employee well-being, and the cultivation of healthier organizational dynamics.

Discussion

Findings of this study offer a vivid portrayal of how sustained micromanagement was experienced f "lived" for three years, during the fourteen-month period of data collection. Viewed through the interpretivist lens, these results reveal micromanagement as a lived reality that is negotiated daily, rather than a fixed managerial trait. The progressive erosion of autonomy, decline in trust, shifting communication toward control-oriented patterns align with y*et al*so extend existing literature on the psychological and organizational costs of excessive oversight. By tracing these dynamics, the research uncovers how micromanagement can evolve from an individual leader's style into a normalized cultural practice, deeply embedded in routines and expectations. This chapter situates these insights within broader theoretical and empirical contexts, exploring how they affirm, challenge, and enrich current understandings of managerial control, workplace relationships, and organizational well-being.

S and L's daily work life and the behaviors continuously faced, evidently align with the micromanagement theories studied; both participants were neither empowered or allowed to make any decisions, nor to work autonomously (White, 2010; Harvey & Brown, 2022) [59, 20]. Also, the above findings do not align with the theory of positive micromanagement mentioned by Ndidi *et al*. (2022) [42]. M's request to communicate strictly via emails and the fact that she always checked the projects/work carried out by the two participants, adding her input (amending/interfering) with their work, showed the excessive oversight and control she exerted, creating blockages. Additionally, M's actions were slowing down the processes since the completion of work did not run smoothly nor quickly, causing delays, and draining employees' satisfaction, morale and driving them to exhaustion, psychological distress, and loss of self and self-confidence (Majhosheva, 2024; Nguyen *et al*., 2023; Kang & Park, 2021) [34, 44, 29]. Surprisingly, even if the two participants faced excessive toxicity at the workplace and were fed up, shouting instead of talking calmly during the interviews, both are still not ready to leave the company nor currently looking for another job due to personal commitments and/or the stability the organization offers

them. This fact stunned the researcher and doesn't align with the research results of Kang and Park (2021) [29], who stated that people are driven through the exit (at least these two participants are not ready yet), but the research aligns with the outcome of reduced organizational commitment. Noting, however, the negative feelings these two humans experience (frustration, anger, disappointment, and sadness) as well as the fact that they are being undervalued and not respected, how can they continue to work?

The current study revealed not just one toxic leader, M, but a second one as well, G, who, at the desperate cry of participant L, not only ignored her but also insulted her, showing a bad character. Both managers exerted toxic/bad behavior without considering the reputational damage to the organization they work for (Gupta & Chawla, 2024) [18]. Can this be the case because the business's management showed favoritism to M? Both S and L stated that they discussed this daily with friends and family about their toxic workplace and how they are treated every day; talking helped them calm down so that they would not behave aggressively towards their children. As far as it concerns the delays of submitting work, it didn't seem to concern G, who was in charge of the department, due to the blind trust he had in M and or maybe because the work/projects were delivered on time to the favorable colleagues, thus "balancing" the delays of submitting the projects on time.

Nevertheless, data collected from observations, feedback from individuals from other departments, internal reports, and email correspondence exchanged with other departments, it was noticeable that other colleagues were annoyed with M for delivering the final projects after the deadline. Frustration from colleagues in other departments was bigger sometimes due to mistakes on documents, and/or because the delivered documents were locked, allowing no access to colleagues to correct mistakes, or change the format of the projects, thus increasing the times documents had to go back and forth prior to being handed to customers. This back and forth made people lose valuable time on delivering projects on time, thus agreements collapsed (competitors gained the customers), and the company started presenting an increasing number of unsatisfied customers. These findings corroborate and align with Ndidi *et al*. (2022) [42], who stated that all four areas of the business are affected by micromanagement.

The strict behavior of M towards her subordinates does not line up with the attribution theory, as there was no basis that employees were perceived as lazy, inattentive, or incapable, nor did M present signs of necessity to meet deadlines (Ross, 1977; Martinko *et al*., 2007) [46, 37]. M only cared to serve on time, the colleagues she favored. The micromanagement style adopted by M shows that it has its roots in the following theme: immediately after she was promoted to a mid-manager, she began to take advantage of the power associated with the position. Unconscious motives, self-insecurity, and past experiences most probably triggered her behavior when she was promoted to that senior position, and this is positively related to the Psychodynamic theory (Gabriel, 1999) [16]. The above conclusion was confirmed with the information received that M has no family of her own, was rejected by her mother in her early twenties, and after graduating from university, she never had a relationship until today at her early forties. This pattern shows M is afraid of human relationships and commitment due to her experience of neglect. She may also feel a threat to her position, so she doesn't allow anyone else to gain knowledge and progress and has a fear of failure because whenever a mistake was detected on the amended projects (which were made by her), S or L was to blame. Also, her fear of "losing" her position, due to the following facts: all three had the same qualifications, and the fear of rejection (situation faced in her twenties), could be the reasons that made her competitive, thus not allowing space for growth for her subordinates, nor to work autonomously. M wanted to control everything S and L did, know everything about their discussions with colleagues over the phone, and did not allow the participants to express themselves, make suggestions, think nor have a personal opinion about a situation or case at work.

Taking into consideration the draining of the two employees, it is easy for one to understand the physical continuity of these actions and the interrelation with SDT and organizational justice dimensions. Looking back at SDT, the three universal psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are required to achieve personal growth and flourishing. Therefore, in alignment with organizational justice dimensions theory, neglecting humans is clear that people collapse, are demotivated, lose interest at work, lose self-confidence, decrease performance as well as the quality of performance and outcome, and people's wellbeing and health are traumatized. Employees are sensitive to factors of justice and fair treatment; unfair allocation of tasks, undermining employees' perception of fairness, transparency, creating a feeling of uncertainty and overall diminishing organizational citizenship behavior will lead to a toxic environment, counterproductive work behavior, mistrust, conflicts, no traces of innovation, and so on.

This research case study explored a highly toxic situation where employees were suffering psychologically at their workplace. Investigating micromanagement style theory alongside this incident in its physical setting, it is clear that micromanagement style was not performed in good faith to give positive results. In this case study, micromanagement is exerted at its highest levels, crossing the lines of positivity, interfering with human psychological needs and organizational justice dimensions, creating bad experiences within the workplace, and causing psychological damage. Surprisingly, neither S nor L was ready yet to leave their organization due to family commitments. Maybe due to fear of change and low self-confidence as well? Both M and G took advantage of their position power and the favoritism enjoyed from business management to behave in such a non-professional way towards the two employees. Most likely, toxic leadership was not addressed in their tasks and business code of ethics; therefore, does not apply in this setting. Additionally, the toxic leadership style and selfishness of the two managers hinder them from understanding the harm they cause to two human lives, nor allow space for progress and development. Finally, this psychological draining also had an impact on their personal life; however, this was not further examined in the present study. To conclude this chapter, micromanagement hurts all parts of business, causing organizational dysfunctions in all operations and outcomes; draining their human resources, delivering bad quality of services/products, and threatening the reputation of the business.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has illuminated how micromanagement, when sustained over time, extends beyond an individual managerial tendency to become a normalized feature of organizational culture. Through an interpretivist approach, the lived experiences of two employees revealed the progressive erosion of autonomy, the weakening of trust, and the transformation of communication into a mechanism of control. The findings demonstrated that these practices not only undermined employees' confidence and well-being but also generated disengagement, reduced motivation, and contributed to organizational dysfunction. Importantly, the study highlights how micromanagement can be reinforced by structural conditions, including favoritism and the absence of higher-level managerial accountability. The complicity of senior management in dismissing employee concerns illustrates how toxic leadership can perpetuate harmful practices, thereby embedding them within departmental routines. These results align with theoretical perspectives on self-determination, organizational justice, and toxic leadership, while also extending the literature by evidencing the ways micromanagement damages both interpersonal relationships and organizational outcomes. In particular, the study underscores that excessive oversight does not remain confined to individual interactions but can reshape workplace culture in ways that normalize disempowerment and silence.

Taken together, the findings suggest that micromanagement must be understood not merely as an ineffective managerial style but as a destructive organizational process with far-reaching consequences. Addressing this issue requires leadership approaches that prioritize autonomy, transparency, and respect, while creating organizational structures that safeguard fairness and accountability. Interventions such as leadership training, clearer reporting mechanisms, and stronger ethical frameworks may help organizations prevent the normalization of micromanagement and its associated harms. It should be acknowledged, however, that the study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single organizational context. While the depth of qualitative engagement provides rich insights into lived experiences, the findings may not be generalizable across all organizational settings. Future research could therefore benefit from examining larger and more diverse samples, incorporating multiple industries and cultural contexts, to assess the broader applicability of these dynamics. Longitudinal research could also further illuminate how micromanagement practices evolve, escalate, or decline over time, particularly regarding organizational culture and leadership transitions. In conclusion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of micromanagement as an organizational pathology that erodes trust, autonomy, and well-being. It reaffirms the urgent need for leaders and organizations to cultivate cultures of respect and empowerment, where employees are valued not only for their labor but for their expertise, agency, and humanity.

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