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## COACHING CASE STUDY: THE MICROMANGING COO

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# Executive Coaching Case Study

## Introduction

Susan\* is a Chief Operating Officer (COO) in a professional services organization. Highly experienced and technically brilliant, she was recently promoted to her role as COO with five direct reports based on her solid track record in cleaning up operational messes. Susan was struggling in her new role: unable to achieve her organizational mandate of reducing costs, working 80 hour weeks, and struggling with her direct reports who were resisting her efforts to meet division goals. Susan's boss Steve, the CEO, was at his wits end trying to figure out what to do. While he acknowledged her brilliant technical abilities, he also spoke about Susan's bedside manner as being very abrupt and caustic, damaging relationships with her subordinates and disengaging her peers. Steve brought me in as an executive coach to work with Susan since the situation wasn't getting any better despite his efforts to help her change.

## Susan's Perspective

Based on conversations with Susan and her direct reports, as well as an assessment of her personality type, I began to make sense of the situation. From Susan's perspective, she is struggling in her new role because her people will not step up and take responsibility for their functional areas. Fiercely loyal to her boss Steve, she wants to improve her business results, but is baffled with how to do this.

Despite her efforts to involve herself in the day-to-day functioning of her subordinates' organizations, nothing is changing. She is frustrated with her staff and refuses to recognize them, believing that if she does this, they will slack off even more. More importantly, Susan is frustrated that her talent for fixing broken organizations used to be recognized and rewarded by her employer but is now frowned upon. She feels the rules changed on what constitutes effective behavior for leaders somewhere along the way and nobody told her. Susan wonders whether it was a mistake to take on this role and is considered stepping back into her former position.

## Coaching Assessment Discoveries

In my role as an executive coach, I always collect information from both my client and key stakeholders as an initial attempt to clarify the focus of our relationship. I administered the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator (MBTI) personality assessment for Susan to help discover her natural preferences. She typed out as an Extraverted-Sensing-Thinking-Perceiver (ESTP). As with any personality type, the strengths of the ESTP type, when overused, can become significant liabilities:

- Taking charge in crisis situations
- Direct and assertive style
- Seeking action and immediate results

In essence, Susan's strengths, based on her personality, were also the source of her biggest liabilities. In instances like this, it's critical to help leaders better assess situations in order to become more choiceful about the behavior they use and avoid overusing their strengths.

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Further, I interviewed her direct reports and peers, discovering additional perspectives. Her subordinates perceive she holds a view that nothing they do is good enough since they receive no positive strokes for their attempts to cut costs. Further, their efforts to manage downward are thwarted by Susan's meddling and intervening directly with their direct reports. Finally, some peers dread interacting with Susan because she does not listen to their opinion and constantly contacts them to determine the status of her requests.

## Coaching Approach and Strategies

Based on the 360-degree assessment I conducted, Susan decided on several key competencies for her development:

- Shifting her view of her role from doer to leader
- Adapting her overly intense, task-focused style to be more supportive, engaging, and patient
- Increasing her capacity to cope with and respond to stress by enhancing her self-awareness and coping strategies
- Engaging her team to formulate a compelling 3-5 year vision to motivate them toward specific goals beyond the immediate cost-cutting crisis
- Developing the ability to coach the performance of her direct reports, instead of simply telling them what to do or doing it for them.

## Outcomes and Next Steps

Susan was successfully able to achieve her developing goals and remake her reputation in her organization, particularly with the CEO. She is making in-roads to her business goals. Susan used a number of strategies to achieve this:

- Sharing her insights from the assessment process with each stakeholder interviewed and inviting their input to demonstrate her desire to grow from the experience and begin the process of healing these relationships
- Developing greater situational awareness so that she could avoid overusing her strengths by becoming more choiceful about her behavior
- Building her awareness about how others' perceived her through emails and adapting her approach including allowing strongly worded emails to "season" for a few hours before sending them, including salutations and thanking her staff for their contributions, and avoiding email altogether when having to deliver tough messages
- Engaging a member of her management team who was very skilled at understanding people to review her communications and provide insights on how to soften the intensity and thereby improve the impact
- Engaging her management team to create a compelling 3-5 year vision for her organization, allowing everyone to have a stake in their collective future

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- Empowering selected stakeholders to give her feedback in the moment if she starts coming on too strong as a means for building situational awareness
- Exploring the longer-term career interests of her direct reports and incorporating this input into stretch project assignments
- Identifying a "pet project" that she alone would own in order to satisfy her need to hold tightly to a project

While Susan still has far to go to rebuild her reputation and demonstrate to these stakeholders her commitment to change, she has made substantial inroads on this process. Most importantly, she took immediate bold and deliberate action to demonstrate to her boss and other stakeholders her commitment to learn from her mistakes.

*\* Susan represents an amalgamation of several client experiences to maintain anonymity*

## Professional Biography for Dr. Kevin Nourse

Dr. Nourse is a research-based executive coach and organizational development consultant with over 20 years of progressive experience in both for-profit and governmental organizations. He focuses his work on creating resilient leaders, teams, and organizations. He is also on the faculty of the Georgetown University Coaching Certificate program.

Kevin has a Ph.D. from Fielding Graduate University where he conducted research on crisis leadership among middle managers during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. In addition, he has an MA degree in human resource development, an MA in human, and a BS degree in Information Science.

Some of Kevin's former and current clients include Abbott Pharmaceuticals, American Association of Port Authorities, AstraZeneca, American Psychological Association, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Eli Lilly, Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA), Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, National Cancer Institute, Port of Los Angeles, Texas Instruments, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Prior to launching his practice in 2001, Kevin worked as an HR director, financial analyst, CPA, instructional designer, training manager, and software developer.

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