

Harvard Editorial

Chapter 6: How to Help (Without Micromanaging)

Provide the right kind of support at the right time

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HBR'S 10 MUST READS ON NEW MANAGERS | TRAINING MODULE

The Management Dilemma: Neglect vs. Intrusion



The Fear: Neglect

Leaders fear 'micromanagement' labels, leading to a 'sink or swim' approach. This results in isolation and confusion.

**The Challenge:
Providing necessary
assistance without
undermining efficacy.**



The Reality: Intrusion

Unwanted help creates negative emotional reactions and erodes autonomy. However, complex work requires support.

Learning Objectives: Conceptual Understanding

- Understand the psychological impact of unwanted or poorly timed help on employee morale.
- Distinguish between 'preventative' help (often rejected) and 'responsive' help (often welcomed).
- Analyze situational needs to determine the appropriate 'Rhythm of Involvement'.
- Differentiate the 'Evaluator' role (judgment) from the 'Helper' role (support).

Learning Objectives: Practical Application

- Apply strategies for timing interventions when employees are cognitively 'ready'.
- Foster psychological safety when entering a subordinate's workflow.
- Evaluate current behaviors to identify traps like the 'Swoop and Poop'.
- Determine when to use 'Intensive Guidance' versus 'Path Clearing' in real scenarios.

Conceptual Foundation: The Helper's Paradox



Strategy 1: Time Your Help Wisely

Conventional Wisdom

Myth: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Belief: Preempt problems before they occur to save time.



**Shift to
Readiness**

Research Reality

Fact: Preemptive help is often rejected or undervalued.

Approach: Wait until subordinates recognize the need for help (Readiness).

Evidence: The Restaurant Decision Experiment

Study of 124 groups making entrepreneurial decisions



When advice was given in the course of work—after problems emerged—it was utilized more effectively.

Application Case: The “Ready to Receive” Mindset

1. Observation

Manager at GlowDesign notices shorthanded team has scope issues.

Resists urge to fix immediately.

2. Availability

Manager states: “I am available if you need me.”

Does not impose solutions.

3. Solicitation

Project Lead (Violet) realizes need, solicits input.

Help is utilized effectively because it was sought.

Strategy 2: Clarify Your Role

The Power Dynamic

Managers control pay and promotion. Unannounced intervention implies "You are messing up" (The Evaluator Trap).

The Helper Frame

Explicitly state intent to support, not judge. Foster psychological safety (Edmondson) to reduce vulnerability.

Application Case: The 'Crutch' Metaphor

“I’m not here to change the project. I’m just here to help you... to be your crutch.”

Gary, Senior Partner at GlowDesign

Context: Gary flew to New York to help a struggling project leader (Aaron). By clarifying he was a support structure ('crutch') rather than a fixer, he neutralized the fear of a takeover.

Strategy 3: Align Rhythm of Involvement

Intensive Guidance

- For complex, creative hurdles.
- Clustered interactions (days).
- Deep collaboration.

Path Clearing

- For ongoing friction/logistics.
- Intermittent intervals (weeks/months).
- Brief check-ins.

Rhythm Mode A: Intensive Guidance

Deep Help for Complex Hurdles



Prerequisites: Readiness (Timing) and Role Clarification must be established first.

Rhythm Mode B: Path Clearing

Intermittent Help for Competent Teams

Path Clearing Activities

- Handling logistics (ordering lunch, scheduling).
- Participating in client calls to add weight.
- Removing bureaucratic roadblocks.

Warning

Avoid the “Swoop and Poop”

Managers who drop in without knowledge, criticize shallowly, and leave. Path Clearers must maintain enough general knowledge to understand needs.

Special Context: Remote and Hybrid Work

Virtual work removes serendipitous encounters, increasing risks of isolation or intrusion.

Applying the Framework Remotely

Timing	Role	Rhythm
Explicitly ask about readiness instead of assuming.	Over-communicate intent to support to reduce anxiety.	Schedule “Path Clearing” sessions to prevent feelings of abandonment.

Applied Scenario: The Flawed Data

Scenario

You manage analysts working on a high-stakes forecast due in 5 days. You notice a fundamental flaw in their data, but they are working excitedly.

Discussion

Do you intervene immediately?
How do you frame it?

Analysis - reveal at bottom

Approach: Ask clarifying questions to help **them** see the flaw (create readiness). Frame role as a 'stress-tester' to ensure their hard work pays off.

Common Misunderstandings

Myth	Correction
Good managers prevent all mistakes.	Allowing minor stumbles builds readiness for advice and deepens learning.
I shouldn't get involved in the details.	Intensive Guidance requires details, provided it is time-bounded and collaborative.
My employees know I'm here to help.	Power dynamics obscure intent. You must explicitly state your non-evaluative role.

Knowledge Check: Deep Help vs. Micromanagement

Scenario

A manager takes over a subordinate's keyboard for three days to rewrite code while the employee watches.

Is this micromanagement?

It depends on the preconditions.

- If uninvited and unexplained = Micromanagement.
- If invited (Timing), framed as support (Role), and for a complex hurdle (Intensive Rhythm) = Deep Help.

Key Takeaways: The Framework for Helping

1

Timing

Shift from Prevention
to Readiness.

Wait for the problem
to be felt.

2

Role

Shift from Evaluator
to Helper.

Explicitly declare
non-judgmental
intent.

3

Rhythm

Shift from Random
to Aligned.

Choose Intensive
Guidance (Deep)
or Path Clearing
(Intermittent).

Final Thought: Empowering Ingenuity

The goal is to be a boss who comes through when needed most.

‘Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.’

— George S. Patton

Modern Adaptation: Tell them what to do, wait for them to engage, and then help them achieve it.