

DON'T TAKE THE MONKEY

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Micro-Management

We'd just come off our best year ever for project results. The project teams had outperformed commitments on every major project, in terms of finance, time, and quality. The savings on one of the conversion projects had delivered double the expectations when it was completed four months early; double, as in a \$100 million pre-tax savings to the bottom line. So why were my boss and I suddenly sitting on the bad end of a disciplinary action conversation?

It had a lot to do with taking a monkey off of someone's back. I'll come back to finish the story, but first, let's talk about the monkey. What do we mean when we say "taking the monkey" or "the monkey on your back?" We use the phrases often when we're in a meeting and we want to make sure that someone has taken overall responsibility for a deliverable or action, as in "who's got the monkey on their back?"

The origin of the phrase "monkey on your back" is hard to trace. The best I could find was a reference to The Fifth Voyage of Sinbad the Seaman. Sinbad is shipwrecked on a lonely island and offers to carry an old man to the other side of a creek. Once on the other side, the old man refuses to jump off and clings like an ape-like creature for weeks until Sinbad tricks him into letting go of his monkey grip.

In that sense, having a monkey on one's back is carrying around a burden with the clingy nature of a monkey. So a "monkey on your back" is another way of saying you have the burden or responsibility for something until it is done or someone else takes it on.

So what's so wrong with taking the monkey off of someone else's back onto yours? Plenty, if you don't have the knowledge, skills, resources, and bandwidth to make it happen right. When a manager or project manager does this repeatedly with their team, they're disparagingly referred to as a micro-manager and the negative effects can be long term and significant. You've heard it said and maybe even said it yourself, "Why can't he or she just tell me what they want and let me do my job?"

There is a famous workplace axiom that says "people leave managers, not companies." Few, if any, would describe a micro-manager as a good manager. According to Harry Chambers, author of My Way or the Highway: The Micromanagement Survival Guide, micro-management is so widespread that 79 percent of us say we have been micromanaged. Chambers goes on to say that 71 percent of us indicate that micromanagement has interfered with our job performance, and 85

percent say morale has suffered as a result. Sooner or later everyone works with a micro-manager.

Finding and retaining good managers is a growing problem for companies worldwide. According to a Harvard Business Review article in June 2010, “nearly 60% of companies are facing leadership talent shortages that are impeding their performance. Another 31% expect a lack of leadership talent to impede their performance in the next several years.”

The 2009 World of Work Report by Randstad, the second-largest staffing organization in the world, not only mentioned “the shortage of skilled and talented employees; but this year, the survey results stress the imminent shortage of qualified managers to fill the void retiring baby boomers are already starting to create. And there is more: Not only will there be a shortage dictated strictly by demographics, but there is also a lack of will on the part of those who are currently in the workforce and could aspire to management positions.”

Adding to the issue, Gen Y, the most child-centric generation, wants a relationship with their manager that requires more time and skill than previous generations. They want daily feedback, coaching and developing, and the latest breaking information to do their job. This doesn't mesh well with Gen X's desire for independence and hands-off style of management. Developing good managers from the existing talent pool, including current micro-managers is critical for the future world economy and our well-being.

What is micro-management?

Wikipedia describes micro-management as “control of a person or a situation by paying extreme attention to small details. Often this excessive obsession with the most minute details causes a direct management failure in the ability to focus on the major details.” One of my favorite definitions of micro-management is “consistently working at a level of detail below where you should to get the most done.”

Some famous micro-managers have been very successful, but not without their detractors. According to a Wall Street Journal article on micro-management, “former Disney CEO Michael Eisner ordered stronger bulbs put in reading lights in Disney hotels. Former President Jimmy Carter personally reviewed requests for White House tennis courts. And Martha Stewart described herself as a “maniacal micromanager.”

There are many signs of micro-management, but some of the key ones are:

- Monitoring and assessing every step of a process or project
- Avoiding delegation of decisions
- Unnecessary and overly detailed reports
- Strong desire to win or be right
- Pointing out trivial mistakes often
- Using a higher authority's name to create motivation
- Interrupting others

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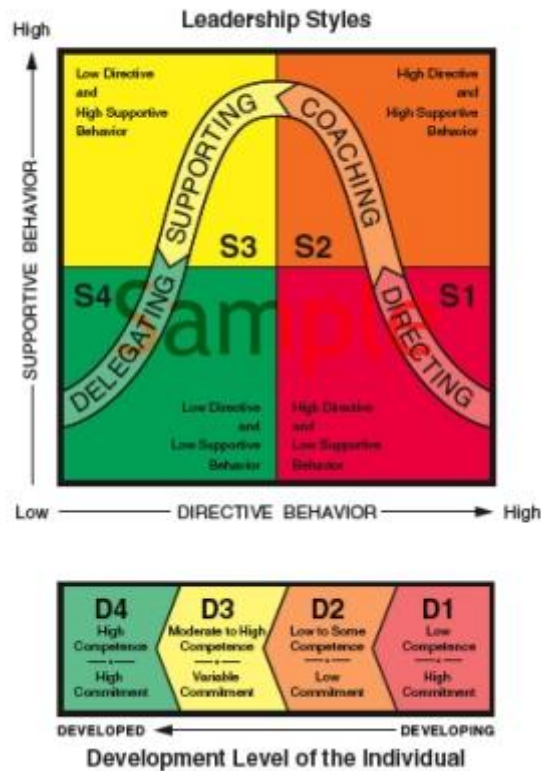
- Taking over team members' meetings
- High intensity situations are the norm
- Withholding key information

What's wrong with micro-managing?

So to rephrase the earlier question, what's wrong with "taking the monkey" or micro-managing when it gets the job done?

Granted, there are situations where a manager needs to be more involved in the detail. Ken Blanchard describes it in his Situational Leadership II model where competence or commitment are low you may need to do more directing or coaching versus supporting or delegating. However, when situational leadership goes wrong, the leader can become micro-managing or worse bullying.

Situational Leadership® II **The Model**



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What are the negative impacts of micro-management?

Other than creating a team of zombies that only does what they're told, the effects can be farther reaching than you might expect. Let's look at it from five perspectives:

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Organization

In numerous recent studies, the top reason that employees leave other than compensation is because they are not allowed to contribute as much as they can. The primary reason that they give for this is poor management and leadership. The cost of employee turnover can be very expensive to a company and can negatively affect the ability to recruit good performers for a fair wage. The cost of turnover is estimated to be between 100-250% of an employee's annual wages.

It can cost in other ways, too. In Indiana, a medical technician sued and was awarded \$325,000 in damage after his boss shouted threats at him with clenched fists. One of the less obvious impacts to the organization is what it does to overall morale by lowering performance expectations and creating a culture of entitlement for just showing up.

Innovation

When team members' ideas are not listened to or valued, eventually they will stop making them. In other words, creativity will be stifled. Suggestions that a habitual micro-manager makes are almost always taken as commands.

Quality of Work

When management spends less time managing at the macro level and more time doing at the micro level, less gets done and quality suffers. Their team members are being underutilized and have little ownership for the results, so their doing the minimum that they have to do. Bureaucracy and other waste almost always increases with unnecessary micro-management. Many micro-managers are more concerned with the appearance of control than the outcome.

Customer Service

Lower quality and team engagement usually means lower customer satisfaction and higher costs for service and rework. Customer frustration can increase from decisions that are deferred to management and delayed. And overall, when employees aren't happy, it's hard to have happy customers.

You

Whether you're the micro-manger or the micro-managed, it's no fun. In fact, it can have quite damaging personal affects; stress and low self-esteem being some of the main ones. According to McKinsey Quarterly, "for more than 75 percent of employees, dealing with their immediate boss is the most stressful part of the job. Lousy bosses can kill you – literally. A 2009 study tracking 3,122 men for ten years found that those with bad bosses suffered 20 to 40 percent more heart attacks than those with good bosses.

Sometimes, the effects of micro-management can have very serious consequences. Take the case of the United Flight 173 from Denver to Portland. While lowering the landing gear, only two of the landing gear indicator lights lit up. The plane repeatedly circled in the vicinity of Portland while the crew investigated the problem. Still uncertain, the pilot decided to go around once again, against the recommendation of the co-pilot. As a result the plane ran out of fuel and

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crash-landed. There were 24 serious injuries and ten deaths. The investigation revealed that there was, in fact, no problem with the landing gear and that the unlit indicator light bulb had burnt out. The NTSB determined the following probable cause, "The failure of the captain to monitor properly the aircraft's fuel state and to properly respond to the low fuel state and the crewmember's advisories regarding fuel state. This resulted in fuel exhaustion to all engines. His inattention resulted from preoccupation with a landing gear malfunction and preparations for a possible landing emergency."

The NTSB also determined a contributing factor to be, "the failure of the other two flight crewmembers either to fully comprehend the criticality of the fuel state or to successfully communicate their concern to the captain."

Was prior micro-management a contributor? Were the other crewmembers afraid to speak up or take initiative because of previous experience doing so?

What are the causes of micro-management?

Although micromanagement is often easily recognized by team members, micro-managers rarely recognize it in themselves. And if they do, they rationalize that they have to do it because their team member can't or won't do it right.

Following is a list of the leading causes of micro-management identified by renowned sources in this field, including McKinsey, The Conference Board, Catalyst, Harvard Business Review, Bnet, and others. These findings were further substantiated through an informal survey of hundreds of leadership developers and managers.

- Fear of Failure (False Expectations Appearing Real)
- Inadequate Planning
- Perfectionism
- Time Mismanagement
- Bad Habits
- Ineffective Communication
- Inaccurate Assumptions, Prejudices
- Reactive
- Weak Delegation Skills
- Self- Absorbed or Low Self-Confidence

How can you avoid micro-management?

The best way to avoid micro-management is by being a better coach and by being coachable. Avoiding micro-management is a two-way street. Actions can be taken and should be on both sides of the micro management equation, the micro-manager and the micro-managed.

As a leader, you must start by accepting that you need others to accomplish great things and you can't *make* them want to do it. As former US President Eisenhower put it,

“Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done, because he wants to do it.”

Setting aside the fact that we physically can’t do it all, we mentally cannot as well. Studies have shown that the human mind can only focus on one thing at a time and in fact significantly lose productivity we try to do otherwise, such as simultaneous-tasking. We have selective attention.

This is demonstrated well in a famous experiment done by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris in 1999 at Harvard University. The participants were asked to watch a video of six basketball players, three in white shirts and three in black shirts, and to silently count the number of passes made by the players in the white shirts. Part way through the video, a gorilla strolls into the middle of the action, thumps its chest, and then leaves, spending nine seconds on the screen. At the end of the video, the participants are asked how many passes they counted, then how many saw the gorilla. Surprisingly, half of the people who watched the video and counted the passes missed the gorilla. It was as though the gorilla was invisible. You can view this video for yourself at the www.theinvisiblegorilla.com, but you’ll notice the gorilla, of course, since you’ll be focused on finding it.

As managers and team members, we need an open environment and interaction to leverage what everyone on the team can see and do. Ultimately, managers need to be better coaches and team members need to be coachable.

The Three Cs of Coaching

There are three components to Coaching Management: Connect, Clarify, and Commit



CONNECT

Build trust, openness, and goodwill

When connection does not exist, self-consciousness does. The team member becomes fearful of saying the wrong thing. They are not open to their own self-discovery. Connection lays the foundation for building understanding in other areas by taking down defenses and fear of safety. It helps surface what really matters. You have to continue to build and maintain trust in both directions of a relationship.

Whether you are the manager or the team member, connection starts by realizing that it’s not about you. To create connection, you must think about what the other person is feeling.

Following are the key components of building connection:

- **Be Respectful**

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Be present and acknowledge their presence. Don't act distracted. Nothing can shut down an open conversation quicker than answering your phone in the middle of it. Make sure that your attention is undivided. Learn to ask permission before you take their time or provide a suggestion.

And don't forget the golden rule, especially during stressful times, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. "Please" and "thank you" are still three of the most powerful words in the English language. The next time you receive feedback that's hard to hear, try responding, by just saying "Thank you." Doing this, will open the door to hear more of what you need to hear and not just what you want to hear.

- **Value the Person**

Dale Carnegie, Sigmund Freud, Dewey, and many other great philosophers over the years have written about it in various words, but it all comes down to the greatest human desire is to be important, to matter, to be appreciated. You can do this by showing a sincere interest in your team members as individual persons. Learn about their families, their hobbies, their dreams. Empathize when they're feeling bad. Validate their feelings by acknowledging them.

Learn about their thinking and learning styles and motivators. Are they an introvert or an extrovert? You might consider taking your team through assessments that can provide this information for your whole team and how they can leverage this knowledge to collaborate better. Don't forget to share your own assessments.

When Herb Kelleher was asked how he made Southwest Airlines into such an admired company, he responded, "I treated my employees as my most important customer."

- **Find Common Experiences**

Trust comes from identification with the other's thoughts and opinions, because you perceive they are like you. Seek out where you and your team member have common interests or experiences. In the book, [Influencer: The Power to Change Anything](#), one of the keys to building support for an idea is that the message must come from someone that they perceive to be "like them."

- **Be Authentic and Open**

If you're asking your team to be open, you need to be the same. Be what you want them to be. If you make a mistake, tell them so. Ask if you can start again if the conversation is not going the way you planned. Respectfully, let others know if something does not work for you.

- **Be a Positive Source**

One of your jobs as a manager is to create excitement towards achieving goals. Too often managers create stress. The difference is in creating an environment where your team believes that the goal can be achieved. Complaining about the difficulty and problems only takes it down the other path. As someone wise once said, "If you think you can or think you can't, you're right."

One negative habit that many managers and team members have is reacting before thinking when someone makes a suggestion. Unfortunately that first reaction is usually, "that won't work" or "No" or "But what about." Instead, create an environment where people are encouraged to find what's positive about the suggestion and build on it. One way I built this habit with my team was to frequently use the phrase "Yes, and", even when I wanted to say "No, but."

When our team members seek us out for advice, they're not looking for criticism. Use this opportunity whenever you can to build confidence in their decision making and to feed forward rather than feedback. If they come out of your conversation feeling more empowered than they felt coming in, they're going to be more confident making suggestions and acting upon them in the future.

And, of course, one of the best ways to create a positive environment is to encourage some office fun. This doesn't mean you have to be a comedian. You just need to support laughter and fun when you can. And, having fun doesn't mean you're unproductive. Letting down defenses to share laughter is one of the best ways to bond and get to know each other better. It definitely adds some cushion for when times get stressful. Of course, don't forget to participate yourself. There's nothing worse for morale than a manager that encourages everyone else to participate, then exempts himself to avoid looking foolish.

CLARIFY

Creating understanding of vision, meaning, intention, and development

As a manager, it is your responsibility to paint the picture of success and the understanding of why it is important. You want to make sure that your team knows what is expected of them and likewise you need to know how you are expected to support them to achieve success. As a team member, you want to make sure that you can achieve what is expected and provide input when resources, development, or a plan revision are needed. The goal of Clarification with your team is to identify barriers and enable self-discovery for them to achieve the goals in the best way they can.

- **Actively Listen**

Clarification starts by fully listening with all of our senses. On average, 80% of communication is non verbal. Our body language, our expressions, our tone of voice and inflection are all critical parts of understanding what is being said. If someone is saying that they don't need any help, but they're looking down and talking softly, chances are that they need help but don't know how to ask for it.

- **Set Expectations**

If you want your team or manager to do as you expect, you need to let them know what you expect. Along with good communication skills for these conversations, it is also important to proactively plan to know what your expectations are. As the axiom goes, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

You should clearly state expectations, such as deliverables, roles, communication, measurements, and meeting ground rules. And ask for their expectations of you. If it's important, put it in writing. Outline the desired results, not the methodology. Make sure the standards and the outcome are clear, what needs to be done, when should it be finished and to what degree of quality or detail. Ask team members to provide progress reports and try not to bother them for status updates in between. Preset interim deadlines to see how things are going.

Having a plan is just the beginning, though. Most project managers put together project plans that include expectations in many areas, but often fail when they are not reinforced or validated with the team. Learn and practice communication skills and delegation skills. Delegate the objective, not the procedure. Delegate to the right person. Don't always give tasks to the strongest, most

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experienced or first available person. Spread delegation around and give people new experiences as part of their training.

One area that frequently gets overlooked or changes on a whim are priorities. If your team is conflicted on priorities, they need to let their management know. It is the manager's job to clarify them.

Another key expectation that is almost always unmentioned is what happens when things go wrong. Plan ahead for risks and missed expectations. Decide in advance what actions will be taken if deadlines are missed or commitments are not followed.

Ideally, there should be no surprises for anyone.

- **WHY is more important than HOW**

There are many ways to reach a destination. The same is true of a goal. As a manager, be sure to delegate the authority along with the responsibility. To empower a team with authority, they need to understand more than just what needs to be accomplished; they need to understand "why." Otherwise, they can't be expected to make good decisions without coming back to their manager for frequent validation and minor approvals.

Trust people to do well and don't constantly look over their shoulder. Proactively planned progress reports and measurements should suffice to "trust and validate." Be prepared to trade short term errors for long term results. Communicating the reason Why along with the vision of success allows for the power of the team to come together for the best results.

- **Questions are more powerful than Answers**

If you're doing most of the talking, you'll never know if you're being understood. Instead, you should be asking questions. The questions should elicit more than one word answers and should not be leading. Otherwise, you're only going to hear what you're thinking.

A good technique to use is called dynamic questioning. It is the process of asking an open ended question, listening, and then forming another clarifying question based on the answer to the original question.

Another technique called the 5Ws is used along with dynamic questions to delve deeper or probe for the real message. The 5 Ws refer to questions that start with who, what, when, where, why and sometimes how. For instance, you might ask, "How's it going with the new project?" "Why is that a challenge?" "What do you need to be successful?" "What's standing in your way?"

Questions help us obtain feedback from team members to get the barriers out of the way so they can do the things they do well. They can also help us find out if team members feel they are being treated appropriately.

An effective behavior model for understanding how to create Clarification is the Transactional Model also known as the Parent Adult Child. The model is based on the belief that we all have three egos, Parent, Adult, and Child. We use these egos at different times, sometimes appropriately and sometimes inappropriately. In business situations, the Adult ego is usually most appropriate to create clarity and

understanding. The following model explains the different egos and associated behaviors. Know and practice for when you need to be the Adult, the Parent, or the Child.

	Body Language	Expressions	Vocal Tone
Parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looking down Pointing Hands on hips Head straining forward Patting on back 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You should, you ought, you must Why don't you ever You always... Don't worry... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harsh Judgmental Soothing Commanding, nagging Comforting
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forlorn appearance Drooping shoulders Withdrawal Scowling Skipping, hugging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I want, I wish Wow Did I do okay? One of these days It's not fair It's not my fault 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appealing Complaining Indignant Grumbling, mumbling Sullen
Adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Straight, relaxed stance Slightly tilted head Appearance of active listening Regular eye contact Confident appearance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer of alternatives and options Use of the five "W's" in questioning Ah, I see How do you feel about it? Suitable, recognizable, practical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relaxed Assertive Somewhat deliberate Self-assertive

COMMIT

Align Vision, Desire, and Will

The final step in coaching or being coachable is to Commit. This is where you find out if what you say or hear will be done is actually what is intended and will happen.

- WHY SMART**

Most of us have heard of SMART objectives; SMART being Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistically High, and Timebound. For important goals, we should have SMART objectives; to clearly understand where we are going, much like having a destination on a trip. It also allows us to agree on measures of success.

What makes objectives WHY SMART is a critical factor in Commitment. The WHY in WHY SMART stands for Written, Harmonious, and Yours. In many companies, the goal measurements are set from the top down. This approach often results in low or unknown buy-in from the individuals that are responsible for making the goals. Instead, if you own the goal, you can make it Yours by defining them to align with your own desires, values, and motivation. Making them harmonious ensures that you have them aligned with your overall purpose and other goals. Finally, putting your own goals in writing, forces you to clarify your thoughts. Written goals are a visual reminder of your commitment and focus when competing demands pop up. They are also more easily communicated with other team members for assistance, review, and prioritization.

- **Routine Check-ups**

Routine check-ups are used to preview outcomes and to collaborate on making adjustments when needed. These are sometimes just reports, but should also include in person meetings for two-way, face-to-face communication. Both the manager and the team member should insist and commit to these meetings. The authors of Influencer: The Power to Change Anything examined factors of employee satisfaction with their manager and found that the best predictor were frequency of interaction. Of course, this was not the type of interaction that could be interpreted as micro-managing.

- **Reinforce and Reward**

The most visible sign of Commitment is how we follow-through on expectations. The team and management should encourage positive behaviors and skillfully confront negative behaviors. The manager should be committed to being their team member's best advocate and letting them lead when it is the team member's meeting.

Feedback should be encouraged and rewarded from all levels and directions in the team. Managers should also commit and follow-through on celebrating successes and desired behaviors. Don't wait for the end goal to be met. Plan, commit, and celebrate along the way. Short term goals and celebrations create momentum and motivation to persist in the right direction. Remember to maintain connection by personalizing the rewards. One size does not fit all. For some, public rewards are uncomfortable. Also, keep in mind that for some, more responsibility can be the best reward. Likewise, make sure that the rewards are not de-motivating or contrary to the behavior you wish to reinforce. When giving credit for achieving the goal, the manager should always give it to the team.

- **Make it a Habit**

The behaviors associated with being a good manager or team member have to be done consistently. Connection and Clarity have to be maintained. New habits have to be formed. Focus on two or three critical behaviors and practice them for three or more weeks every day. Seek out needed training and coaching. Enlist your team members to help you. It may be as simple as having others point out when you interrupt or start responding before listening. Ultimately, habits will form when we change our patterns of thought.

The Rest of the Story

So what happened that after an extraordinary year of accomplishments my management and I were now sitting on the wrong side of a disciplinary meeting? It started with a commitment from us that no matter what, we would complete a certain construction project on time. When the situation arose that the customer notification team was going to delay a critical path component, we "took the monkey" rather than manage the situation with other managers, the sponsor, or both. We committed to do the customer notification process with little guidance, no authority, few resources, and low competence. One of our most important customers did not get properly notified, experienced a major revenue-affecting outage, and threatened to leave. As a result, we got a hard lesson and a written warning.

The good news is that the customer did not leave and we still got the opportunity to learn what we should have done. Not only did we learn the lesson, but for the next month, we shared our story with our team members, other project managers, and leaders throughout the company in hopes that they

would learn from our mistakes. We connected, we clarified, and we committed that it would not happen again. And, just for safe measures, we enlisted “a village” to make sure.

“Knowledge is learning from one's mistakes. Wisdom is learning from the mistakes of others.”

David Herdlinger, executive coach and author of [Healing a Hospital](#)

What's next?

So if you think you're a micro-manager or want to be less micro-managed, it's not enough to just read this article and expect it to happen. You've got to act upon it. The best way to learn something new is repeated exposure, internalization, and application

It starts with assessing your strengths and weaknesses. According to Cornell University's David Dunning, “poor performers consistently overestimate their intellectual and social skills. In contrast the best performers accurately judge both their strengths and their flaws.” When is the last time that you've had an objective assessment of your management strengths and weaknesses?

What three things can you change that will make you be a better manager or can help your manager be better? Make a plan, get the knowledge and skills you need, start applying them and make them habits of thought and application. Reach out and ask for support from your management and your team or even a development coach. Be the best that you can be and help those around you do the same.

As Zig Ziglar once said, “*You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great.*”

Keep making it happen!

About the Author

Cindy Sanders Meyer is a partner at Intouch Management, a workforce engagement, management development, and business improvement partner for growing companies and emerging leaders. From strategy to goal, IM links customers, goals, and individual performance for measurable results... GUARANTEED. Cindy also provides interactive presentations and workshops on various subjects customized to meet your needs. Contact us for achieving your goals today. www.StrategyToGoal.com 913-232-8392.

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