

Ned Coy, a famous Dakota cowboy, starts out for the cattle roundup with his pet "Boy Dick."



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Guiding Hand

... riding a horse, running a gasoline powered, rear-tined tiller, or waxing a floor using a huge floor buffer, you might have learned that a white-knuckled grip doesn't help steer the beast where you want and exhausts you in the process. Sometimes a light touch and very little effort can drive huge forces exactly where you want them to go.



You can't control every detail, and you can't force anyone to do anything.

The most power you can bring to bear on any individual, and hence on any team, is the threat to have them fired, and that doesn't solve your problem, even if it does make you feel better for two seconds. Short of that, and we never think it's a good option unless someone is clearly destructive, you may feel the compulsion to

Photograph by John C. H. Grabill, 1888; Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, John C. Grabill Collection [LC-USZ62-34595].

control things, to monitor, adjust and fine-tune at every level and opportunity. Well, forget it. You'll never find the energy, everyone will hate you for it, and you certainly won't make the Manager Pool cut. And though we can't validate this scientifically, work increases in direct proportion to the amount of meddling you do, both for you and the members of your team. If you've been running things with a death grip on every detail, we'll bet you're mighty tired, and your people are even more tired of you and your breathless panic over every little thing.

For those of you who are less extreme, you still should examine whether you are doing more than you really need to do simply to *look* like you're actively managing. Lighten your touch as an experiment, but do let your developers know that you are doing so, lest they think something's wrong. Let them do their jobs themselves and resist the urge to jump in if they neglect one of your pet project things to do. Perfect management doesn't exist when you have control of everything, but when everything that doesn't need to be managed has been left to its own nature.

Therefore:

Maintain a light touch, intervening here and there minimally, allowing the natural order, the geek's natural order, to move in the direction you've gently indicated. Everyone will be much less stressed, and you'll be able to spend more time cultivating your managerial wisdom.



As one of the authors was being punished by enforced managerial duties at work, it was discovered in the application of this pattern (we call this "eating our own dog food") that some staff, left to themselves, ultimately exposed their inability to self-guide or self-motivate. This discovery underscored a key point: This is not an abdication of leadership (although the author was hoping it would be), but a reminder that a "gentle guide" is still a guide. If someone on your staff still can't act, it is critical information, and the context for dealing with this individual has shifted. Find another way.

Additionally, there are times of crisis when you will have to jump up and seize the helm with great vigor and steer through some dangerous shoals to reach calmer waters. As in the use of any pattern, there is no substitute for your good judgment.