



CHAPTER 5

THE CONTROLLER

“Nobody does it better than me!”

Compelled to be the best, the Controller obsesses about winning. He believes that others are constantly seeking the same, so he must overpower them to prevail. Life is tough and only the strong survive.

The Controller is convinced that he has all the right answers, both for himself and for the organization. Consequently, it is his job to tell people what to do—and stay on them to make sure they do it—since their efforts are rarely good enough. And if something goes wrong, someone must pay—but not him.

At Riva Corporation, Foster runs the Finance department with an iron fist, insisting on making virtually every decision. He values efficiency and productivity far above interpersonal dynamics. Quick to judge, he rants during the Highline meeting about the faults of the other departments and blurts out directives, careful to ensure his area’s needs are met. When the others question his ideas, he insults them, further distancing himself from his peers.

The Controller Mind-Set

Unlike Complainers, Controllers refuse to surrender to the whims of others, especially to weak authority figures. To protect themselves, they must be invincible and keep anyone else from getting the upper hand. As a result, they have great difficulty yielding responsibility to others. But when mistakes surface, Controllers, like Complainers and Cynics, don't admit to any shortcomings and usually have a host of scapegoats readily available.

We've seen that Cynics use cunning to achieve their goals, needing to be perceived as intellectually superior to others: "I win, you lose." On the other hand, Controllers rely on intensity and aggression to get what they want, and they need others to see them as being in charge. Their attitude: "I will win—and I don't care about anyone else."

Extreme Controllers come from a place of self-absorption or arrogance, consumed by a desire for the spotlight. And the only way they can get that attention is by holding the decisive command position. Focused solely on their own concerns and grounded in a deep sense of entitlement, they are usually oblivious to the needs of others.

Given their compulsion to do everything right—as defined by them—many Controllers believe they are serving a higher cause. They just want the job performed their way and long to be recognized and rewarded for their efforts.

Controller Behaviors

Like the Cynic, the Controller tends to be a perfectionist. Both saboteurs claim to know the right solution, but Cynics usually just talk about it without taking action. In contrast, Controllers take charge of everything while setting impossible goals for themselves,

as well as for their subordinates. Often workaholics, Controllers will obsess over tasks and pick and probe relentlessly at others' efforts. They'll reward loyal subjects who toe the line, but will deliver public consequences to those who fail to meet their expectations.

Although Controllers might appear benevolent to cooperative underlings who are hungry for their approval, they will quickly attack anyone who questions their motives or methods. Some Controllers will obstruct rising stars in the organization, especially if the up-and-comers might make them look bad. To satisfy their need to win, Controllers will also ignore or rebel against superiors' directives and feedback, especially constructive criticism. Cocky and impatient, many often act rashly—recall Foster's proposal to slash costs and cancel development projects.

Some Controllers come across as mavericks—think James Bond or Rambo. Blunt, indiscreet, and self-righteous, they claim to be beacons of truth. Less-mature associates in an organization will mistake the maverick's bravado for seasoned leadership and follow him into unwinnable causes. The Controller reveals little about his thinking but insists his actions have a noble purpose, giving him an out if difficulties arise.

Foster's bold confidence lacks grounding. He isn't serving the higher cause of Riva Corporation, nor is he collaborating with his team members to create the best solution. Instead, he's certain that he has *the* way out of the trouble. His brash statement—"I have more project management expertise in my pinky than you have . . ."—both aggravates and alienates colleagues, and overstates his talents.

When Controller behaviors blend with either Cynic or Complainer traits, it creates an ugly combination. The Controller-Cynic, also known as the Cunning Dictator, crushes any resistance to his mandates and is virtually unapproachable. Most dictators of small

countries fall into this category, as well as dictators of small *companies*. The smokescreen of the Cynic mixed with the power of the Controller breeds fear in associates and subordinates. Perhaps worst of all, the Cunning Dictator is usually a skilled communicator who positions himself as a benevolent change agent to the rest of the world, but acts as a condescending elitist inside the organization. Anyone foolish enough to question him becomes a primary target for termination.

Not quite as toxic, the Controller-Complainer combination, or the Weak King, often shows up in smaller organizations and family businesses. This form of saboteur lacks the Cynic's manipulation skills and fortitude. Typically, he has been given—rather than earned—responsibility and never learned how to use his power for higher goals. Thin-skinned about criticism and fearful of losing control, Weak Kings tend to revel in their own insignificant accomplishments, yet belittle others' minor mistakes. When trouble strikes, they'll immediately proclaim their innocence and either fall into the misunderstood whining of the Complainer or offload culpability to an unsuspecting subordinate. Authentic, mature coworkers easily threaten them.

COMMON CONTROLLER BEHAVIORS

1. Insisting on overseeing every decision and refusing to delegate
2. Hijacking discussions and ordering others around, even without the authority to do so
3. Setting impossible expectations
4. Placing productivity, efficiency, and action above relationships
5. Easily losing patience with indecisive people
6. Becoming angry quickly when confronted
7. Ignoring or challenging superiors' directives

Managing Controllers

Recovering Controllers can become valuable assets to an organization. They champion efficient and thorough completion of assignments and can be tough-minded and resolute under pressure. Most Controllers derive meaning, and often their identity, from their accomplishments, making them highly productive associates. They might still want to lead a domain of their own, but with guidance, they can also be loyal to authentic authority figures.

THE CONTROLLER SUBORDINATE OR PEER

To manage Controllers, supervisors must give them some area to call their own—a “sandbox” they can oversee. It doesn’t have to be large, but it must be theirs. They might ask for more than they can handle or you’re willing to grant. As Foster did, they might grumble when they don’t get it all. They’ll continue to push until you set a boundary, so be prepared to do this.

Because Controllers need to be seen as powerful, praise them for their influential presence, and then guide them toward becoming *empowering* rather than domineering. They also desperately want to lead, so coach them in the art of delegation, impressing upon them that enduring leadership and real power are based on the ability to inspire others to accomplish difficult tasks.

Since Controllers are usually motivated by recognition of accomplishments, create a visible scoreboard to track their achievements. They relish a challenge—so give one to them and push them to push themselves. Set explicit metrics, especially intermediate milestones with which you both agree to measure progress. This is especially important with controller-complainers, who will gravitate toward ambiguous agreements. Give them the responsibility they

crave, encourage them toward measurable achievements, and accept no excuses.

Controllers often resist short-term appraisals with some variation of “I’ve got it—trust me” bravado. Given their energy and aura of self-reliance, you might be tempted to relax your evaluation criteria. Don’t. Instead, gently, yet firmly, acknowledge their passion, commitment, and self-confidence, but *still* demand the intermediate checks. Then, get out of their way, accepting that once you turn them loose, you’ll have a difficult time revisiting and revising metrics.

With Controllers who are first-time managers, no matter how diligent you are about encouraging them to delegate and empower others, they’ll likely drift back into “I’ll do it myself” behaviors. Their independence and work ethic have served them a long time, and these habits die hard. When reformed Controllers slip into their old ways, remind them of the bigger goal (a high-functioning team) and their crucial role (empowerment, guidance, and delegation) in realizing it. Emphasize the importance of collaboration among their subordinates and the development of their successor.

When the situation calls for a reprimand, you must meet the Controller’s challenging presence with your own confident stance. Address the issues calmly and candidly. Controllers understand boundaries and power, and will respond to clear commands or ultimatums. Make sure to finish the conversation by appreciating their gifts of tenacity and spirited toughness, along with affirming your belief that they are an able leader in their specific area.

As Controller subordinates move to a more mature place, you might notice them beginning to become more open. This is a huge stretch for them, so applaud them for it. Do the same when they display patience, hear others’ perspectives, and question their own version of what’s right. And when a Controller subordinate delivers

successfully on a deadline or budget, commend him publicly for making big things happen.

TIPS FOR COACHING CONTROLLER SUBORDINATES

1. Applaud initiative and independence, while still requiring intermediate milestones.
3. Establish boundaries for their own “sandbox” and then let them run it.
4. Praise them for empowering others and for proactively informing you of their activities.
5. Reprimand swiftly, decisively, and privately. Reaffirm the explicit behaviors you expect.
6. Consider having a visible scoreboard for measuring their achievements and progress.
7. Dialogue about possibilities and then ask for recommendations. Or, offer a small number of specific choices (all okay with you), and let them decide.
8. Demand their full support once a decision is made, even if they don’t agree with it. Don’t allow second-guessing.

THE CONTROLLER BOSS

Overtly confronting a Controller boss is risky and can limit your career. Instead, build a relationship with him before initiating a difficult conversation. Study his behaviors, attitudes, and willingness to receive feedback.

A Controller boss expects you to perform well so that he’ll look good. Focus on delivering quality work on time and on helping him earn recognition. Since a Controller expects strength and energy from himself and others, hold your ground, speak your truth, and perform assigned tasks with high integrity.

Compliment your boss for his efficiency, which he highly values.

Note, however, that Controllers are sensitive to false praise or fawning, so keep the appreciation short and specific. Deliver compliments with sincerity, and in a matter-of-fact way.

As poor delegators, Controllers will often give vague or incomplete instructions. They assume you'll know what to do and then reprimand you when your deliverable differs from their expectation. Consequently, you must clearly define goals and time frames up front. They might become irritated at your persistence or "ignorance," but insist on explicit agreements. Better to risk their frustration early in the game than to miss deadlines or fail to meet their expectations later.

In the worst-case scenario, if you work for a Controller who resists coaching or leadership development, understand that the probability of authentic interactions is low and that your best coping strategy is to stay below his radar screen. If you're willing to take the risk, you might go over his head to seek reassignment or upper-level backing for your role. This is usually a high-stakes move, so be prepared for the Controller to react with swift, angry retaliation, which might mean your termination.

TIPS FOR COACHING CONTROLLER BOSSES

1. Make them look good so they earn external recognition.
2. Accept your role as the reliable soldier and demonstrate your support and trustworthiness, especially during challenging times. Controller bosses reward loyalty.
3. Establish unambiguous agreements about deliverables and time frames.
4. Avoid complaining or appearing insecure—they expect strength and energy from others.
5. Praise them for delegating and for displaying trust toward you or others.
6. If they micromanage you or override your best ideas, let them have the last word.