

# Eight Signs of Incompetent Managers

## *Lessons learned from America's Most Productive Companies*

Effective managers do more than just supervise employees. They take responsibility for ensuring that an individual succeeds, and that the team, department, or business unit achieves expected results. Effective managers are like successful coaches who develop teams that win championships year after year.

Like winning coaches, successful managers are both talented and skilled. Of course, managerial skills can be developed through training, mentoring, and experience. But if a manager lacks natural talent, his or her odds of success will diminish significantly.

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In our work with [America's Most Productive Companies](#), we have seen time and time again that these organizations are typically more proactive than their peers when it comes to identifying and developing effective managers. The Most Productive Companies provide their managers with the information and tools they need to understand the capabilities and styles of their teams. This gives managers a solid foundation for more effective coaching relationships.

Over the years we have identified eight signs of incompetent managers:

1. **Poor communication skills**
2. **Weak leadership capabilities**
3. **Inability or unwillingness to adapt to change**
4. **Poor relationship-building skills**
5. **Ineffective task management**
6. **Insufficient production**
7. **Poor developer of others**
8. **Neglectful of own personal development**

Sound familiar? Let's take a look at each of the signs in detail, and then we'll offer practical remedies to help your managers achieve greater effectiveness.



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## 1.. Poor Communication Skills

Poor communicators forget that manager-employee communication is a two-way street. They talk (some more effectively than others), but they seldom listen. Often they don't read subtle cues from other people's gestures and tend to interrupt when others are speaking. Even when they don't interrupt, they're often too busy formulating what they'll say next to listen to what other people have to say.

Instead of communicating clearly in writing, in person, and when using body language, poor communicators often work in a vacuum. They neglect opportunities to listen to peers, subordinates, customers, or vendors – even when the issue has a significant impact on these very same people. They don't try to understand other people's positions and are quick to dismiss other points of view.

Poor communicators demonstrate negative body language that discourages others from elaborating on their ideas, and rarely, if ever, give others their undivided attention. They often write inaccurately and don't adequately prepare for public speaking, which means that they come across as disorganized, insincere, or unconfident.

***THE PROBLEM WITH COMMUNICATION ... IS THE ILLUSION THAT IT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED.***

## 2.. Weak leadership capabilities

Sometimes it's tough to speak the plain but inconvenient truth when people really need to hear it – or to give direction to subordinates who don't want to do what needs to be done. No one likes to be criticized, but that's what makes organizations effective. Great leaders can set an example; they walk the walk and talk the talk. Weak leaders are sometimes afraid to bruise egos – including their own.

**In addition to failing to provide clear direction, weak leaders:**

- **Don't instill trust.** They don't keep their promises or respect confidences. When asked difficult questions, they tend not to respond forthrightly. Either they avoid taking responsibility or they're quick to blame others for mistakes. They lack integrity – and their inconsistent actions and words prove it.

***WEAK LEADERS ARE SOMETIMES AFRAID TO BRUISE EGOS – INCLUDING THEIR OWN.***

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- **Neglect to clarify each team member's responsibilities for accomplishing objectives.** They often fail to answer questions until expectations are perfectly clear.
- **Don't distribute responsibilities so that all bases are covered.** They don't bother to ensure that efforts aren't duplicated. That may be because they are either ignorant of – or indifferent to – the workload of team members.
- **Fail to translate tomorrow's vision into today's activities.**
- **Don't effectively delegate responsibility.** They may be insecure and reluctant to give up control for fear of being shown up. Or they want to keep others down as opposed to building them up. We've observed weak leaders who delegate without considering other people's capabilities, interests or development needs. And we've seen those who micromanage, frequently "hovering" over their people, sapping creativity and motivation.

## 3.. Inability or unwillingness to adapt to change

Change is hard. But effective managers know how to handle it. They can adjust to new circumstances. When things are ambiguous, they remain comfortable. In a crisis, they seek solutions. It's often been said that the only constant is change. The trick is to keep a clear head, manage expectations and enable change. Strong managers are change agents.

***YOU CANNOT LEAP A TWENTY-FOOT CHASM IN TWO TEN-FOOT JUMPS.***

**On the other hand, those who can't adapt to change:**

- **Panic when faced with unexpected problems** and sudden crises. They expect the worst.
- Lose perspective of the magnitude of the problem. They **tend to agonize** over minor adjustments to a big plan.
- **Get stuck in reactive mode** instead of proactively anticipating issues and developing contingency plans.
- **Don't think creatively** to overcome obstacles. They view problems as annoyances instead of opportunities to learn and improve.
- Are risk-averse when it comes to trying new

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approaches to solving problems. They're **reluctant to involve others in the problem-solving process**, even when they have more experience or can bring a fresh perspective to the table.

## 4.. Poor relationship-building skills

Relationships - professional as well as personal - require some work. For example, good communication is a cornerstone of a healthy, productive relationship. So are trust and respect. Good relationship builders respect people's differences; they're tolerant. They praise more than they criticize. And when they do criticize they focus on the behavior, not the people. They're always careful not to embarrass other people. And they say what needs to be said - even when it's uncomfortable to say it.

***RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IS AN ART, BUT NOT EVERY MANAGER IS A NATURAL RELATIONSHIP ARTIST.***

Aside from neglecting to maintain strong personal relationships, poor relationship builders:

- **Don't seem to appreciate the impact** of words and actions on others. They don't understand about keeping morale up and making others feel good about themselves and their work.
- **Fail to respect the members of their team** by being consistent and fair, and by showing appreciation for their experiences and viewpoints.
- **Criticize people** instead of people's *behaviors*. They sometimes scold people in the presence of others, and rarely offer specific, constructive suggestions for desired improvement.
- **Don't regulate their emotions** well, especially during times of stress.
- **Rarely facilitate team success**; they tend to ignore conflict between co-workers, or they rush to judgment before listening carefully to all viewpoints in a disagreement. Poor relationship builders don't establish team objectives or encourage cooperation to reap the benefits of a unified effort. And they fail to capitalize on each individual's strengths and experiences.

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## 5.. Ineffective task management skills

Effective task managers know how to establish priorities and make sure work gets done! They know how to say “No!” to activities that will divert them from priorities. They can see the big picture and break it down into specific tasks required to complete a project. They are skilled at assessing their resources, allotting time and materials, [motivating people](#) on the job, and ensuring that each and every milestone and deliverable is accomplished on time and on budget.

***WHEN EVERYTHING IS A PRIORITY, NOTHING IS A PRIORITY.***



Ineffective task managers:

- **Do not ask for help** when they need it.
- **Procrastinate**, especially when a big project seems overwhelming.
- Work carelessly. They accept sloppy work from their team. **They don't set a good example** by consistently delivering quality through their own work. And, not surprisingly, they maintain poor quality control procedures.
- Tend to **blame others** for their own lack of oversight.

## 6.. Insufficient production

Insufficient production can have myriad causes. It could be a simple lack of resources or funding; it could be unrealistic expectations. Some managers lack the technical knowledge to ensure that production demands are met. And, of course, some people just seem to have a bias against taking action. They lack a sense of urgency and won't take initiative, even on matters that are critical to the organization. They take a “wait and see” attitude when they should be taking concrete action.

***DEMING OBSERVED THAT 85% OF ALL OPERATIONAL FAILURES ARE THE FAULT OF FALLIBLE MANAGERS, NOT FAILING WORKERS.***

These managers:

- Find plenty of reasons not to make a decision. They wait for more information; they wait to hear about different options. Some are paralyzed for fear of

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making a mistake. They rarely consider making adjustments to plans later if necessary. Instead, they simply freeze up and stop producing.

- Waffle, remain indecisive and show insensitivity about holding up projects. They don't see the big picture; they don't think through the consequences of their team's, department's or business unit's failure to produce.
- Fail to achieve reliable results. They are generally not clear about what they want or need to accomplish. They're easily distracted, unreliable and erratic. They may lack the will to overcome adversity.

### 7.. Poor developer of others

Just like relationship building, developing other people's talents is an art – one at which not everyone is adept. Developing others can be hard work. Not everyone is naturally capable of delivering constructive criticism. Nor is everyone observant enough to make note of another person's habits, including the habits that need to change. Being a role model or a mentor takes commitment. Unfortunately, not all role models and mentors recognize that. They think their protégés will simply observe and learn. But the fact is, developing skills and talents in others takes much more than just showing up.

***CULTIVATING TALENT  
AND MOTIVATING  
OTHERS DOESN'T  
ALWAYS COME EASY.***

Managers who face a challenge when it comes to cultivating individual talents:

- Don't generally make learning opportunities available because they feel threatened by employees with greater skills than their own.
- Disregard the goals and aspirations of their team members because they don't want them to get ahead. They give feedback on performance only when someone's expectations haven't been met – and only then in a negative and de-motivating tone.
- Seem more intent on breaking down than building up.
- Can't motivate successfully. They fail to recognize or show appreciation for the efforts of their team, even when team members go above and beyond the call of

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duty.

- Have a negative influence in the work environment as a result of their pessimistic outlook and lack of enthusiasm.

## 8.. Neglectful of own personal development

Manager, improve thyself

It sounds reasonable enough, but we've observed many managers who fail to develop their own communication styles, organizational skills or work habits. They might claim that they're committed to the organization or the team, but unless they're willing to continually improve their own skills and talents, how will they ever recognize how important personal development is for the whole team?



Managers who neglect personal development:

Don't build enthusiasm among their team members – and in general they are not very enjoyable to work with

- Give up easily
- Often possess a negative attitude
- Appear highly defensive when constructively criticized
- Have a low level of self-awareness
- Fail to learn from mistakes
- Don't stay current on important developments in their field

## Remedies

The approach to solving personnel issues is similar to solving other issues in your business. The quality improvement cycle is the same:

Measure: Assess current situation

Act: Train, Mentor & Coach  
Re-deploy or Redesign

Check: Evaluate

With the symptoms we've just identified in mind, would

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you say there is a degree of incompetent management within your organization? If so, here's a strategy for handling it:

### ***YOU CAN'T FIX SOMETHING IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S BROKEN***

Determine if the individual has what it takes to be the type of manager you need. That involves a thorough assessment of his or her behaviors and interests. The proper assessment tools will provide insight into the total person, giving you critical information to improve management selection and team performance.

If yes, you should try to help them become aware of their weaknesses. Honest, straight-forward feedback from peers, superiors, and subordinates can help open people's eyes by revealing how others see them. But don't stop with feedback – use it to create a targeted development plan to address specific needs. Leadership skills surveys can identify performance gaps, and by provide coaching guides and personal action plans for improving leadership skills.

If no, then determine how they can best serve the organization. Some incompetent sales managers never should have been promoted from sales. In other disciplines as well, there are practitioners who, based on their performances, are promoted to management. But not everyone has the skills and talent to manage.

In some cases, redeployment is a good solution for both the employee and the organization. Use a unique job-matching process will help you take an underperforming manager and move him into a role where he can be highly successful, increasing morale as well as the bottom line for your organization.

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