

Seven Signs of Incompetent Managers

Managers' behaviors that adversely affect the working process, the company and the brand

LOYP AGENCY, 2014

Which competencies must a manager have for us to say that he is a true *professional*?

Many will be quick to say: "*The most obvious sign of a manager's competence is that he or she achieves good outcomes.*" Such a simple answer seems to be in many ways too populist and often irresponsible. We can accept such an answer only from someone who really knows what he or she is talking about, understands the issue in detail and is personally able to achieve such an outcome, all other parameters being equal. We will not accept it as an answer from others.

Outcomes are time-bound; they are manifested in the present moment, and do not tell the story of how to get there. Moreover, *outcomes* are achieved not by individuals but by teams and budgets. The *outcome* can be affected by the external environment, no matter how much we may want to deny that. Then perhaps we could consider the manager competent if he or she delivers "*stable outcomes*", or, to be more precise, "*stable small continuous successes that together lead to the general outcome*". After all, quite a few managers had achieved some measurable outcome in the past only to find out that in other conditions they could not repeat the same.

Let us put aside our discussion of *outcomes* for a while. An *outcome* depends on practice, not theory. To plan a good *outcome*, we must understand in advance a particular set of characteristics (competences, traits) of someone who will be responsible for achieving the outcome.

Above, we have already referred to "teams", "budgets"... that must be the

key. The answer to the question again seems to lie on the surface and can be phrased as follows: "*There exists a large array of well-defined professional and highly specialized competencies and skills of a good manager. Open any self-presentation or a general manager's job description and you will find many examples of such competencies and skills: in the area of finance, negotiation, strategic planning, and so on.*" We do not fully agree with such a simple answer either. There must be a wide array of such skills in many areas; they must be taught and learned, and a lot of books have been written on the topic. Often, each of these skills, however, describes not the manager's profession per se but the profession of, say, marketologist, quality director, IT specialist, accountant, etc. It would then be logical to conclude that the totality of these skills and the depth of professional development in each of these skills in one particular person will characterize the manager. It is not at every level of process development that the company has vacancies for narrow professionals. And, in theory, any manager must be able to deal with those issues. And whenever specialists with narrow focus are available, the manager must be able to oversee their work effectively. However, no matter how attractive such an answer to our question may seem, we will not consider it a full and complete answer. You will agree that some "fifth element" is missing.

As we search for this missing element, we must understand the notion of the category of "process" (the totality of regulations, informational environments, and people - participants in the process),

the ability to set up and administer the process. A separate branch of inquiry - quality management - is dedicated to this issue. We favor this approach because adding an extensive list of competencies that allow the manager to control the process in addition to other professional characteristics makes the manager's portrait considerably more complex yet full. Nevertheless, even if we add to the above the skills in human relations and motivation management, we will not be able to formulate a universal answer to the question: *"Which competencies must a manager possess to be called professional?"*

Here, in this short article, we will therefore focus on the opposite and discuss the clear **signs of incompetent managers**. We assume that if the qualities we discuss below are not present in the person who is considered a candidate to become a manager or long-term group leader, then all other qualities that would make him or her a successful leader can be easily added or compensated. In other words, when the potential manager does not display any of the attributes as shown below, we may hope that he or she will consistently achieve the expected results, even without regard to the degree of his or her professional development. Let us identify a list of simple, practically understandable signs of a manager's incompetence in the most general context of his or her duties. Most of these duties lie in the area of human relations management and interpersonal communication. Many of them, in our opinion, are present in most managers. This leads to an overall poor workforce performance in this country.

1. Taking Presuppositions as Facts

In busy communication environments, today's managers, when they negotiate with a more skillful or less responsible party, hear not what they are being told but what they want to hear. Details are left out, and then the mosaic is completed with

presuppositions with lack of analysis due to time constraints or because the manager believes that: *"I'm always right, I assume that my expectations and intuition are correct."*

Of itself, such a situation does not lead to any serious consequences and in general is manageable with time: details will be clarified one way or another; the other party's views will be discussed, everything will fall into place. What is dangerous, however, is that many managers, when they *assume* something, start immediately ignoring parallel activities (alternative less profitable transactions, alternative executors, alternative technologies and other ways of getting to the desired outcome). Bringing back lost external alternatives at the time when the alleged did not happen is, in practice, rather difficult and expensive. *"Why didn't you meet with this person as we had planned a month ago? Now we have missed this opportunity!"*, *"I thought that it was not necessary, given that we were already on the right path."* Additionally, with the loss of interest in parallel activities, the manager also contributes to the deterioration of processes within the company. This may concern taking on a less significant project, ignoring some marketing initiatives, etc. Reinstalling the destroyed intra-organizational processes is almost impossible because by the time the manager understands his or her mistake, his or her subordinates will be severely demotivated by the lack of gratitude for their work and will be highly unlikely to return to their previous level of achievement. In the end, "taking presuppositions as facts" is nothing other than a sign of a manager's incompetence in his or her profession.

2. Taken Hostage By Your Own Staff

In the age of technology and due to the lack of qualified managers in Russia, top managers often demonstrate

extreme reliance on their subordinates with narrow yet significant areas of expertise. This dependence destroys positive teamwork and mutual respect between the manager and his or her direct reports. These developments, however, are often instigated by the manager's direct reports themselves who at some point in their career with the company come to regard themselves as exclusive and indispensable. Being an important and useful team member working for the benefit of the company is one thing. Becoming exclusive and indispensable is quite another.

Incompetent managers in this situation would communicate to the employee that he or she is being considered indispensable. No matter how hard the manager tries to hide this dependency, it shows through his or her emotions, comes up during meetings with other colleagues and influences the context of decisions being made. By failing to discuss this situation with the direct reports and avoiding addressing the problem, with time the manager generates a heap of problems. The supposedly indispensable employee is almost deified, and this gives a negative example to others who feel that they should be privileged too. Among other things, internal coordination is lost, the company finds itself having to increase compensation while the quality of the person's performance goes down. Other employees who feel undervalued may leave. All these developments are always due to the manager's incompetence, be it his or her ability to understand the direct reports' work, the ability to find a replacement for the problem employee on the scarce labor market, the ability to compensate for the subordinate in question by referring to the wealth of accumulated knowledge, or the ability to dismiss such an employee - you decide. "Being taken hostage by your own staff" is in essence a sign of

weakness that testifies to loss of leadership qualities.

3. Failure to Provide Colleagues with a Full Picture of the Situation

Any thinking person would probably agree with the statement: "The more information, the fewer mistakes". If so, why should this not be extended to subordinates? Any manager who assigns a job to his or her subordinates is probably the one most interested in its effective implementation. And if so, then as a true mentor, he or she should describe the job at hand in a way that he or she would have wished to have him- or herself, were they in their subordinate's place. Then, as the task is being performed, the manager should immediately advise the employee should new information regarding the job bypass him or her.

This is not to say that the employee *needs to know everything* - no. He or she must, however, know *everything concerning the job they are doing*. For instance, the employee must know the motivation behind the job, its external environment, real (not perceived) degree of risk in the event of failure to deliver the result, alternative courses of action in case of failure, and the time required to do the job. All this information is a powerful resource that the employee will use to implement his or her job successfully. Quite often, however, managers withhold some of the essential information needed to perform the job, either consciously or due to lack of foresight. In most cases they provide the following explanations.

a) *"If I tell him (or her), their motivation will decrease, and they will feel less responsible for the final result."* This is a good argument, which is, in principle, understandable. But when you state it like this, you seem to question the professional competence of your staff member. Then the problem you face would be to either

educate the employee, or replace him or fire him; it has nothing to do, however, with his or her responsibility for the current assignment.

b) *“Why should he or she know? This information applies only to me and I will need it to take independent action.”* Leaving the employee in the dark may lead to him or her not acting as intended by the manager and, in time, acting within the scope of his or her responsibilities, will successfully complete a slightly (or totally) different task and never reach the results as intended by the manager.

c) *“Let him (or her) do the job as is; if I told them everything, anyone would be able to do it.”* Testing the employee in such an inappropriate manner clearly shows that the manager has a surplus of free time on his or her hands and quite a low degree of responsibility for the final result. In modern business, wasting subordinates’ time in such a way is not allowable. If you should want to test your employee, do so during his or her trial period. When you train someone in this manner, and the employer pays for it, first consider whether you yourself need some training. This motif is typical of large bureaucratic structures with a high degree of internal scheming within the team.

In either case, the employee becomes aware of mistrust; ultimately, this becomes detrimental to teamwork and affects negatively employees’ progress. Failing to provide a full picture to his or her employees, the manager shows his or her weakness and incompetence, not power.

4. Deleting Tasks With No Warning

Every manager sometimes finds him- or herself working on tasks that are not followed through to some practical (direct) outcome. This happens to business directions that are never materialized, work on transactions that are never completed, introducing internal projects that with time lose

their significance, etc. We call these “wastebasket projects”. Having a more general picture of all the circumstances than his or her subordinates, and having to plan far ahead, managers are often the first to realize that a particular project belongs to the “wastebasket” variety. Ideally, this should be communicated to the subordinates, and all relevant tasks should be, if not removed, then assigned a lower level of priority. Managers fail to do this due to the following reasons:

a) *“Let them finish so that they don’t get upset about doing something in vain.”* Such reasoning is possible only in companies which are in no hurry to act and where revenue is generated from a source other than its operational activities. And what about utilizing your employees’ time? Compiling a knowledge library and training staff in order to complete a task is, most definitely, a plus for the brand. But these gains are not comparable with the costs of losing time, which the employees could spend working on a more useful project. Also, in the end, your employees will eventually come to know that their work had been in vain, and they will be demotivated anyway, perhaps even more so. If you cancel the task on time, however, you can avoid the demotivation factor altogether.

b) *“What if he (or she) succeeds? I don’t feel like stopping or discouraging him (or her).”* It is highly unlikely, so don’t count on it. When a manager understands the situation, he or she should not hope for a miracle. You must trust your judgment and act pragmatically. Your subordinate, who has limited resources in every sense when compared to the manager, will not be able to overcome the limitations beyond the scope of his or her competence. Moreover, the manager him- or herself would already switch to a different task and will not be likely to

help the employee for whom the manager's assistance is indispensable in achieving the desired outcome.

c) *"I had promised him (or her) a bonus for this, now this bonus does not fit the budget; I cannot initiate cancellation of this task."* If a manager finds him- or herself in such a predicament, this shows that he or she is impulsive and inconsistent when it comes to bonus expectations of his or her subordinates. This is absolutely inadmissible for a competent manager.

Therefore, considering the consequences that canceling projects without announcing it has for the process and the brand, we will consider a manager who behaves in this fashion as incompetent.

5. Problems with Managing Down

Under time pressure, many active managers when they come into direct contact with junior staff tend to change their priorities or start setting new tasks altogether. They seem to think: *"I will be able to explain things to the subordinate of my subordinate as to what they should do better and more precisely. I have no time to waste on courtesy."*

Another reason for such direct contact can be a different type of connection between the manager and the employee: *"I will assign my friend to work for Ivanov in this department for a while."* Mixing up personal and professional in communication is understandable; however, in this case Ivanov will later be bypassed in communication.

But respect for the chain of command is not a one-way process. When managing down, the chain of command is even more important than when managing up. We will not go into detail here as to what these violations might mean for mid-management, the chain of command and staff motivation.

Access to the required resources can be set up ethically, without disrupting the process. To provide direct access to the expert in question, a special work group can be set up or a temporary group manager can be selected. If the manager chooses to manage down chaotically, his or her subordinates will fail to meet their responsibilities, and a chaos in the one-person-rule regime will ensue. Some companies function this way, and their employees say that the company depends on the charisma of the general manager who gets involved in everything. Such companies, however, either are short-lived, or show relatively slow growth, if they grow at all. Inability to communicate down is a trait that any professional manager must avoid at all costs.

6. Pondering Dismissals

Most top managers prefer not to dismiss employees; instead, they choose to gradually exclude the employee from the working process, or delegate the dismissal to their colleagues.

A different situation takes place when there is no talk of dismissal even when the manager has decided that the employee in question does not fit well in his or her company. Yet the manager is still plagued by the thought: *"If not this person, then who?"* HR management literature describes the concept of *replacement cost*, which includes an estimate of the time it takes to regenerate the potential lost after the employee's dismissal, losses related to replacement of the employee during a new candidate search, and the cost of finding a new full-time employee. It is this factor that many managers cite when they say they are reluctant to dismiss employees. But the concept of replacement cost is not applicable in the present case. If an employee is up for dismissal because he or she does not meet the performance expectations for those or

other reasons, what replacement costs are we then to consider?

If the company is geared toward brand development, the decision to stop working with this or that employee is a long-term strategic decision, much more important than current tactical issues and current dependency on a particular employee. When you need to dismiss an employee, you cannot hesitate. If the manager ponders the dismissal decision for too long, we call into doubt this manager's professionalism.

7. Delegating Without Control

Whenever the manager lacks a particular professional skill, he or she may choose to fully delegate to his or her subordinates certain professional issues of key importance (for example, financing decisions or project activities). At first glance, this seems like a good idea that works. But the gain is short-lived. According to Murphy's law, *"If something bad can happen, it will certainly happen."* It's just a matter of time before a complex situation gets out of control. Then when reporting about the failure to their superiors or trustees, the manager assigns the blame to his or her subordinate in charge *"Because he did not follow through. I did not get involved because this was his (or her)*

zone of responsibility. We were apparently all mistaken in him (or her)... he (or she) seemed like a good specialist..." You will agree that this sounds pathetic. The fiasco apparently had already happened. The problem here is that the manager had put his or her faith into the employee in question and did not try to find control points in the area in which he or she is not competent enough. He or she did not hire additional experts, did not follow through this or that decision at the level of comments left by colleagues, never found enough time to study the problem through the eyes of the employee.

The attributes that we describe in this article have been copied from managers who had once achieved something but at some point became dependent on a certain problem area that led them to failure. If a manager in your company displays some of the above features, stop and think about it. Choosing to develop your brand with such a person and increase his or her level of responsibility and power may just be your oversight. Many other competencies can be acquired by the manager without causing losses for the business. But you can hardly compensate for the weak points described above.

